

**Losers and Superior Overlords –
Humor Strategies in Nerdy Internet Memes**

Pro Gradu Thesis
Outi Immonen
Area and Cultural Studies
University of Helsinki
Spring 2017



Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta		Laitos – Institution – Department Maailman kulttuurien laitos	
Tekijä – Författare – Author Outi Immonen			
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title Losers and Superior Overlords – Humor Strategies in Nerdy Internet Memes			
Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject Alue- ja kulttuurintutkimus, Pohjois-Amerikan linja			
Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level Pro gradu		Aika – Datum – Month and year Toukokuu 2017	Sivumäärä– Sidoantal – Number of pages 109
Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract			
<p>Tutkielman tavoitteena on tutkia humoristisia, nörtti-aiheisia internetmeemejä. Tutkielma pyrkii selvittämään millaisia teemoja näissä meemeissä käsitellään, miten löydetty teemat hyödyntävät erilaisia huumoristrategioita, ja mitä huumorilla lopulta saavutetaan.</p> <p>Tutkielma käyttää teoreettisena kehyksenään sekä meemitutkimusta että huumoritutkimuksen ylemmyysteoriaa. Tutkielma on laadullinen ja tutkimusmenetelmänä käytetään temaattista sisällönanalyysia. Aineisto koostuu 300:sta internetin kuvapalvelinsivustolta kerätystä meemistä. Aineisto luokitellaan kymmeneen siinä yleisimmin esiintyvään teemaan, jotka muodostavat neljä laajempaa ryhmää. Nämä ryhmät ilmentävät erilaisia huumoristrategioita.</p> <p>Neljä laajempaa ryhmää ovat nörtit luusereina, nörtit ylempiarvoisina, naispuoliset nörtit, ja nörttirepresentaatio. Kolme ensimmäistä muodostavat tutkielman käsittelyluvut. Nörttien luuseriutta esitetään epähaluttavan ulkomuodon, intensiivisten harrastusten ja epäonnistuneiden ihmissuhteiden, sekä vale-nörttiyden kautta. Nörttien ylemmyyttä esitetään älykkyydellä, ylpeydellä sekä aggressiivisella ylimielisyydellä, joka mahdollistaa myös väitetyt menestyksen ihmissuhteissa. Naisnörtit leimataan meemeissä teeskentelijöiksi tai huomionhakuisiksi.</p> <p>Aineiston analyysi osoittaa, että meemit käyttävät etenkin pilkallista huumoria, joka jakaantuu kolmeen eri alalajiin. Niillä joko ylläpidetään tai haastetaan sosiaalista järjestystä, sosiaalisia normeja ja vakiintuneita stereotypioita. Aineiston perusteella nykyinen nörttistereotypia on liioiteltu versio aiemmasta ja korostaa ominaisuuksia joita valtavirta ei näe haluttavina. Maskuliinisuuden käsite ja sen muutos ovat tärkeässä osassa nykynörttiyttä ja sen asemaa.</p> <p>Yhteiskuntien digitalisoituminen sekä nörttiyden suosio populaarikulttuurissa ovat muuttaneet nörtteihin suhtautumista. Tästä johtuen nörtit ovat nousseet ylemmäs sosiaalisessa hierarkiassa, sekä saavuttaneet maskuliinisemmän aseman. Ei-nörtit kokevat nämä muutokset uhkana, jonka seurauksena he yhä pilkkaavat nörttejä vanhojen stereotypioiden perusteella. Naispuoliset nörtit pyrkivät saavuttamaan hyväksytyin aseman nörttikulttuurin jäsenenä, jonka vuoksi miesnörtit kokevat olevansa uhattuina. Tästä syystä naisnörtit ovat miesten pilkan kohteena ja heidät suljetaan nörttikulttuurin ulkopuolelle.</p> <p>Tutkimus osoittaa, että osallistumiselle avoimen internetkulttuurin rooli on huomattava, kun luodaan uusia representaatioita. Aineiston perusteella etenkin pilkallisen huumorin rooli nörttikulttuurissa ja sosiaalisten hierarkioiden ylläpitämisessä on myös merkittävä.</p>			
Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords nerd, meme, ridicule, superiority, masculinity, representation, stereotype, digital culture			
Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited Keskustakampuksen kirjasto			
Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information			

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT	2
1.1 DIGITAL CULTURE AND THE INTERNET	6
1.2 THE HISTORY OF A NERD	9
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	18
2.1 MEME STUDIES	19
2.2 SUPERIORITY THEORY IN HUMOR	23
3. MATERIALS AND METHODS	28
3.1 INTERNET MEMES	28
3.2 CONTENT ANALYSIS AND CATEGORIZATION	31
4. NERD AS A LOSER.....	37
4.1 NERDY LOOKS	38
4.2 NERDY INTERESTS.....	51
4.3 LACK OF RELATIONSHIPS	57
5. NERD AS A SUPERIOR	66
5.1 INTELLIGENCE	67
5.2 PROUD OF BEING A NERD	72
5.3 AGGRESSIVELY ARROGANT	77
6. THE GIRL NERD DILEMMA	84
6.1 MALE NERD HEGEMONY	85
6.2 GIRL NERDS AS A THREAT	92
7. CONCLUSIONS.....	98
REFERENCES	102
APPENDIX 1	108

1. Introduction and Context

Nerds run the Internet. They are the creative force behind technological innovations, and use the web as their playground. Knowing about the Internet and technology is a vital skill for each of us in contemporary societies, but not everyone has to be expert in those fields. That is why we need nerds. The way they think, act, and especially joke around are important things to study, because this subculture and its members are so present in the today's world. My Master's Thesis discusses humor strategies used in nerd humor, examined through user-generated content: Internet memes. Nerds are an essential part of digital culture, which is a trend that is changing our current world, lead by the United States. The world is continuously more digital and dependent on the Internet, which means that it is vital to study the people who are creating this new culture and its elements.

Digital age and culture attached to it are driving a larger cultural and societal change. The United States has a central role in this, acting as a driving force. Nerd culture is transnational, yet its influences come from the U.S. The niche nerds tend to be interested in is something that has been produced in the U.S. for decades: comic books, science fiction films, technological innovations and scientific discoveries. For instance, Silicon Valley in California is the center of technological creativity and multinational companies – Google, Apple, Facebook, to name a few – and it also played a major role in the start of the Internet and contemporary digital culture.

The role of a global influencer the U.S. has, both in politics and culture, is important and widely recognized. American culture and values have become universal. This topic is often referred to as using “soft power”. The role the U.S. has started to grow after World War II, and has increased during the age of globalization. Movies and television series produced in Hollywood have played a large role in cultural spreading, and currently the Internet is a part of this diffusion as well.¹ These arguments, and the questions of cultural imperialism and hegemony have been a part

¹ See e.g. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 11–17, 48–51.

of academic discussion for decades². My case study shows that this role exists and is important at least when it comes to nerd culture.

Nerd culture can be defined in different ways depending on who explains it. In this thesis I define nerd culture to be its own subculture, members of which share similar interests, sense of humor, and certain looks. By subculture I refer to a smaller culture inside a larger one, which is somehow deviant from the mainstream – often because of its interests and preferences – has a certain style of e.g. dressing up or behaving, and shows some sort of resistance towards the mainstream culture³. Nerds⁴ are thought to be intensely passionate about the things they are interested in. These interests can for instance be in technology, science, games of all kind, books, or popular culture products. This is, however, a rather simplifying definition. Nerd culture does not mean one specific thing, nor can its members be easily recognized, which is why defining it is difficult. However, based on the memes analyzed in this thesis, nerds are depicted rather stereotypically, both based on their looks and what they are interested in. These stereotypes come from the past and popular culture. When I discuss nerds in this thesis, I mean the exaggerated representation of a nerd who has bad skin, wears large glasses and out-of-date clothing, and is socially awkward. In this study nerd culture is a subculture that is perceived through very distinguished stereotypes, and used as a source of humor.

Humor appears to be a vital element of nerd culture. Rational discussion is often overwhelmed by emotions in online communication, and humor has become one important way to gain visibility for your agenda. Thus, the comic register often shapes the contemporary experience, and humor is increasingly central to current social and online life. I will use nerds as a case study to discuss humor strategies, i.e. how humor is created on the Internet. I argue that humor is a vital part when creating social categories and power structures, especially online. By nerd humor I mean the

² See e.g. Lee and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000) and Bernd Hamm and Russell Smandych, eds., *Cultural Imperialism: Essays on the Political Economy of Cultural Domination* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2005).

³ J. A. McArthur, "Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2009): 58–60, 66–67.

⁴ The word "nerd" is often used interchangeably with "geek". In this thesis I will use "nerd" to mean all nerdy-like characters, yet I do recognize that these two terms do not necessarily mean the same kinds of individuals. In my data, however, there is no visible differentiation between them.

kind of humor that is either produced by nerds themselves, or is about nerds, ridiculing them. Until now the three most common themes concerning nerds in academic research have been nerd identities in popular culture,⁵ and questions of gender⁶ and race⁷ inside nerd culture. Nerd humor has not been widely studied, which is why I see it as an important topic and I think it will bring a new and needed perspective into studies about nerds and participatory culture. The development of digital culture and the role technology has in our current lives have intrigued scholars in the past as well,⁸ which shows that these themes are important.

The rise of digital age and digital culture have fundamentally changed the way nerds are perceived, and especially made nerds more accepted by the majority of the society. Technology has become a part of everyday life and the borders between virtual and reality have blurred. One of the most important changes in the digital age has been the development of technology to something that serves people and is easy to use and carry around. The era of computers started to strengthen in the 1980s when e.g. Apple launched their new and heavily branded computer and aimed to create digital communities out of people buying their products.⁹ The Internet started to develop already in the 1960s¹⁰, yet it was only in the beginning of the 2000s when it truly was available for the masses due to more affordable connections. This was also the time when participatory digital culture started to develop properly.¹¹

In the past nerds were bullied, but as technology has evolved and Hollywood keeps producing films with successful nerdy characters and comic book superheroes¹², being a nerd is not so embarrassing anymore – instead, it has become trendy. In recent years nerds have been able to turn the past bullying around by mocking

⁵ See e.g. Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 260–283.

⁶ See e.g. Marianne Cooper, "Being the "Go-To Guy": Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the Organization of Work in Silicon Valley," *Qualitative Sociology* 23, no. 4 (2000): 379–405.

⁷ See e.g. Mary Bucholtz, "The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2001): 84–100.

⁸ See e.g. Martin Hand, *Making Digital Cultures: Access, Interactivity, and Authenticity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

⁹ Sydney Eve Matrix, *Cyberpop: Digital Lifestyles and Commodity Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28–36, 44–45.

¹⁰ Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 149–152.

¹¹ E. Gabriella Coleman, "Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls: The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 109.

¹² See e.g. Lauren Gilmore, "24 Must-See Movies Proving Geek is Chic," *The Next Web*, February 28, 2017, <https://thenextweb.com/distract/2017/02/26/nerds-rule-movies/> (accessed March 1, 2017).

themselves. This has taken the power away from the bullies, and empowered nerds as a community. Joking about stereotypes – the large glasses, sci-fi fan fiction and not having a girlfriend – are showing non-nerds that the previous ridiculing and mocking will not hurt nerds anymore. The bullying still exists, but it does not contain as much power. Nerds, no matter how much they would joke around about being nerdy, are also proud of who they are. My case study shows how nerds' humor makes them sound superior to non-nerds, which then leads to empowerment. I intend to study how nerds are part in creating the new nerd stereotype, through participatory culture. In addition, nerds are creating a larger view of nerd culture and bringing it more into mainstream.

In this study I aim to answer the following questions:

What themes are visible in Internet memes about nerds?

How are these themes using different humor strategies?

What does this kind of humor usage accomplish?

I intend to show how different humor strategies can be used to interpret contemporary data. The study will not be all-inclusive, as nerd culture is as vast as any other subculture. Interpreting humor is also always very individual and connected to the receivers' cultural background and the context of the joke. Despite nerd culture being transnational, it has different elements in different countries and cultures. Here, however, I will focus on the American version of it, which seems to be globally known and understood.

This thesis consists of seven chapters. In the first chapter I have introduced my topic and its importance, and laid out my research questions. I will continue by explaining briefly the history of digital culture and the Internet, and how nerd culture and the representation of a nerd were in the past, to introduce the context of this study. Chapter two introduces my theoretical framework and defines the key terms I will use. I will refer to both humor studies and meme studies when analyzing my data. The third chapter is where I lay out my materials – Internet memes – and explain the method I used to analyze and interpret them. The most important chapters of this thesis are four, five and six, as they show my actual analysis. I have divided the

analysis into three separate chapters based on the key themes that were visible in my data. The memes can be separated into two main groups, based on the categories I gave them: Nerd as a Loser, and Nerd as a Superior. A third group was more deviant and not as large in number, but is still very interesting: Girl Nerds. I will primarily focus on the first two groups. The last chapter will present my conclusions of the topic and my research, and suggest perspectives for future studies.

My own position to this topic is rather close. I grew up in a home that encouraged us to read, to study and to enjoy video games, to balance it all out. My parents and brothers enjoy science fiction and fantasy, and are all rather technologically savvy. No one at home talked about being a nerd as being a bad thing, only through loving jokes. In addition, the friend group I have gathered around my “adult” self is nerdy, and sometimes we make jokes about this status of ours. The Internet is a familiar place for me as well, which is why I found it logical to choose my research materials from its depths. Having nerdy qualities means I understand the inside jokes nerds often have, making it possible for me to interpret these nerdy memes. I am not an outsider researching the culture; I am a member of the culture, trying to understand it better. I acknowledge my relationship with my topic and distance myself from it to keep this research legitimate. The nerd in me provides the interest and the tools to understand this culture, which is why I found myself drawn to it.

1.1 Digital Culture and the Internet

Contemporary Western societies rely heavily on technology and the Internet. Our cultures have been digitalizing during the past couple of decades, continuing to do so. To contextualize my study of Internet memes and nerds I will now briefly introduce what I mean by digital culture and its development, and explain the history of the Internet and how it became our everyday asset. Both of these have had a large and important role in nerd culture as well, which is why it is essential to discuss them here in the beginning.

Culture as a concept often refers to “shared meanings”. To be part of the same culture we need to understand these collectively decided and shared meanings about the topics that are discussed. This shared culture is created through shared language

and signs that signify how we create the wider understanding of our surroundings.¹³ Charlie Gere highlights that the word “digital” is not unambiguous, and is often used interchangeably with the words “technology” and “computer”. He continues by stating:

To speak of the digital is to call up, metonymically, the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience.¹⁴

A simple word is thus harder to define than it seems, despite it being constantly used. Gere proceeds by defining “digital culture” as a specific culture where digital refers to a certain way people or groups live their lives. It is also linked to time and space, and refers to the ways in how people communicate in contemporary societies.¹⁵

Interestingly, the first programmable computer – more than just a machine to calculate things – was already developed in the late 1940s for the U.S. Army, and it provided solutions to some of the problems caused by the Cold War. The U.S. had a large role in the early computer development, creating e.g. copy-paste commands and separate program windows, and this leading role has been carrying on for decades.¹⁶ Personal computers for commercial use started to develop in the 1970s. Before this computers were the size of a room and mostly used by universities, businesses, or the military. Technology enthusiasts, so-called “hackers” – who I will discuss a bit later – and university students started to build their own machines, eventually leading to the first “working” computer – yet still not very user-friendly – created in 1976, by the same men who would later establish the now billion dollar company Apple. In 1984 Apple launched a modern-looking personal computer, which started the true age of commercial computers as other companies, like Microsoft, followed.¹⁷ Therefore, as Gere also notes, digital culture is the creating force behind technology and its advancements, yet as well the result of this development, making the two closely linked to each other¹⁸.

¹³ Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation*, eds. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 4.

¹⁴ Gere, *Digital Culture*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48–50, 62–65, 68–70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 136–142.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

The Internet, as briefly mentioned before, was already born in the 1960s. So-called ARPANET was the start of the Internet, being a connection between four university computers in the United States, in 1969, and was used by scholars and the military¹⁹. In the late 1980s, physicist Tim Berners-Lee developed a method to share academic papers on the Internet, which at that point was working over phone lines, creating the foundation for what we now know as the World Wide Web. His system was still rather hard to use, as it required certain software, but in 1993 a research group in the University of Illinois created a browser that would work on several devices.²⁰ With this, Internet with easier accessibility was established, yet due to the costs of it, as well as the cost of computers, it took until the early 2000s for the Internet to truly be available for the masses²¹. Both computers and the Internet originate from the U.S., making the country an important actor in the development of digital culture. The current Internet is often referred to as Web 2.0, highlighting the participatory aspect of it: the Internet is not only for searching information, but creating your own content and sharing it²². This has also been affecting digital culture in large, making it more focused on participation and interaction²³.

The ideological and societal role digital popular culture has had – both in society and the development of youth culture – is altogether remarkable. It is also important to note its role in building nerd identities, and in the changes happening with how nerds are perceived. Sidney Eve Matrix defines a culture that focuses on and obtains from technology as *cyberpop culture*. According to Matrix, this is popular culture made for the masses, focused on consumerism, often dealing with technology and e.g. science fiction. Cyberpop is, in her words, an essential element when trying to change how people see technology and its role in everyday life. Its role in forming identities and lifestyles is also noticeable.²⁴ I argue that this kind of culture has helped making nerds more accepted in our contemporary societies. Technology has become more personal, making digital culture a part of identities: people are creating their own image through technology. A big factor in this has been the popularity of

¹⁹ Gere, *Digital Culture*, 71–72, 150.

²⁰ Ibid., 150–152.

²¹ Coleman, "Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls", 109.

²² Glen Creeber and Royston Martin, "Introduction", in *Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media*, eds. Glen Creeber and Royston Martin (New York: Open University Press, 2009), 3.

²³ Ibid., 5.

²⁴ Matrix, *Cyberpop*, 1–4, 137.

user-generated platforms and content, for instance social media channels like Facebook or YouTube.²⁵ The Internet offers a place for playing with identities²⁶, which means that it is possible to create oneself on the Internet over and over again. This is linked to ideas of postmodern subjects²⁷, when the surroundings of a person create a possibility to mold identities e.g. between different social media platforms, depending on into which group a person wants to belong at what time.

The Internet and computers were largely created with the help of nerds, making these people an important part of the development towards contemporary digital societies. This development has led to changes inside nerd culture as well, especially when it comes to the acceptance of nerds. One factor in this change is commercialism and marketing. All things nerd are nowadays more visible than they used to be, making it easier to identify as a nerd – for both nerds and non-nerds. Making nerd culture mainstream and trendy has made it more accessible, and not just a subculture for minorities. Internet has played a huge role in this, especially because finding information is currently easy and fast. As digital culture has become more ordinary and widespread, nerd culture has also become more accepted. Elements of nerd culture have infiltrated our everyday lives and we seem to be fine with it. Next I will explain the history of nerd culture and nerds themselves in more detail.

1.2 The History of a Nerd

The way nerd culture is depicted among Western cultures is heavily based on certain definitions and stereotypes. Stuart Hall, a widely referred cultural theorist and sociologist, discusses the concept of “representation” and how it is in the core of understanding cultures and the world around us in large. Hall states that “representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language”²⁸, meaning that we pick certain words to represent certain things; we use language to create definitions. Hall also introduces theories through which

²⁵ Matt Hills, “Case study: Social networking and self-identity,” in *Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media*, eds. Glen Creeber and Royston Martin (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2009), 117–119.

²⁶ Ibid., 118.

²⁷ See Stuart Hall, *Identiteetti*, trans. Mikko Lehtonen and Juha Herkman (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1999), 23.

²⁸ Hall, “The Work of Representation,” 2–3.

representations and their creation can be understood. Constructionist approach is the most useful in this study, as it states that people create meanings for things using certain “concepts and signs”. People are thus important actors in creating meanings and conventions, because these do not exist on their own.²⁹

In this thesis, the idea of representation is of course linked to nerds, and how they are portrayed and represented in the chosen data. This especially refers to visual representations; how a nerd is considered to look like. The memes offer a stereotypical nerd representation, which seems to be widely understood in Western cultures and especially on the Internet. This representation still draws heavily on the old stereotypes, but there seems to be a change happening in how nerds are depicted. When someone refers to nerds, other people understand what they mean because they are familiar with the representation that exists in their shared culture and language.

Another key term in this study is “stereotype”, which is very closely linked with the idea of representation. As Hall puts it:

Stereotypes get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them.³⁰

Stereotypes are simplified and compressed meanings about certain things – often about people or groups. They are extensively known and very overstated, claiming that e.g. all people in certain culture look or act the same way. In this study nerd stereotypes refer to the established representations about nerds: the way they look and the things they enjoy. Nerd stereotypes claim all nerds look the same way and are failing with their social lives, condensing this large group of people into one single mold. It is important to remember that stereotypes are often false and negative, as they tend to highlight the unaccepted or unwanted features. In addition, Hall points out that stereotypes are used to separate “normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable”³¹, creating strict divisions and “us versus them”

²⁹ Hall, “The Work of Representation,” 10–11.

³⁰ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” in *Representation*, eds. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 247.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 247–248.

dichotomies. This refers to what e.g. Hall means by the “Other” in societies: the ones who for some reason do not belong. Furthermore, this links to expressing power relations and keeping social hierarchies intact. According to Hall, stereotypes often exist where power is not divided equally between groups³². In the case of nerds, the ones creating these stereotypes are non-nerds, because they are higher in social hierarchies and have more power. In this thesis, I understand power not as physical control, but in “broader cultural or symbolic terms”³³, as Hall explains it.

Now that I have introduced these two key terms – representation and stereotype –, it is time to answer questions about the context of nerd culture: How has nerd culture, its recognition and its acceptance changed during the last few decades? Nerd identities had a negative stance in the past, but the development of digital culture has slowly changed how people see nerds. Not only has the way nerds are treated changed, but also the way nerds see and identify themselves. The definition of a *nerd* I use in this study originates in both previous research and my own data. The widely known representation seems to emerge from the past and popular culture, but based on my data this image appears to be changing due to the development of contemporary digital culture. The memes are presenting a change in the representation, which I will discuss in more detail in the analysis chapters.

Who is a nerd, then? The English language has several words that can be used when talking about nerdy characters, but *nerd* seems to be the most common one³⁴. This word has been used for decades already, but its meanings have been changing. The word “nerd” was first used in 1950 in Dr. Seuss’s children’s book *If I Ran the Zoo*, but it did not mean what it means nowadays.³⁵ A newspaper article in 1951 mentioned how the slang in Detroit (Michigan) was now using “nerd” instead of “square”, to mean a person who was boring and not chic³⁶. According to Ron Eglash, the term was first used to reference an intelligent yet socially awkward person in

³² Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” 248.

³³ Ibid., 249.

³⁴ Also geek, dork, and dweeb. See *Oxford English Thesaurus*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/thesaurus/nerd> (accessed February 15, 2017).

³⁵ Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 262.

³⁶ David Brooks, “The Alpha Geeks,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/23/opinion/23brooks.html> (accessed March 25, 2017).

1960, in a burlesque show written by students of a college in Pennsylvania.³⁷ Lori Kendall – who has studied nerds rather widely – states that a nerd became one of the stock characters in television shows and films about teenagers around mid 1970s. Kendall gives the movie *American Graffiti* (1973) and television show *Happy Days* (1974–1984) as examples of the first popular culture products using a nerd character. In fact, *Happy Days*, with its nerdy character *Potsie*, is often declared to have made the word nerd widespread³⁸. Computers and technology started to be connected to the nerd character in the 1980s, as those became more common, for instance in the film *Sixteen Candles* (1984)³⁹. So, at first nerds were smart but odd and socially inept, but when computers became mundane the word was connected to being technologically savvy, in addition to being intelligent and awkward.

Kendall defines a nerd in her 1999 article “Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture”. She is referring an online nerd test, which states that nerds are good in school, intelligent and know vast amounts of facts especially about technology, are socially awkward, use computers extensively, and are passionate about science fiction. An important part of the definition is how nerds look: they are not interested in fashion and their clothes do not fit properly, they wear large glasses, and they do not pay attention to personal hygiene. The last part of this definition is the fact that nerds are often depicted feminine when it comes to their body type or abilities to play sports, meaning they were seen as failures. This feminization also relates to nerds not having romantic relationships with women.⁴⁰ I will discuss this topic of gendered status more in detail in chapter 4. These qualities appear to build the representation of a nerd that has been present especially in popular culture, and therefore explain the way many people would picture a nerd. This is the old representation of a nerd I will refer to when discussing the representation the memes present.

A nerd was often a teenager, especially in popular culture products. This explains why they are often pictured having bad skin or acne. The nerd character became one

³⁷ Ron Eglash, “Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters,” *Social Text* 71, vol. 20, no. 2 (2002): 61.

³⁸ Lori Kendall notes that Douglas Coupland’s novel *Microserfs* (1995) points this out. See Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 280.

³⁹ Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 262, 280.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 262–264.

of the so-called archetypes in American youth films: he/she was the smart and unpopular kid, trying to cope in high school with the athletic types, the popular girls, and the rebellious ones – some of whom were the bullies. For instance, a popular youth film from 1985, *The Breakfast Club*, presents these different characteristics, or stereotypes: “a brain [nerd], a beauty, a jock, a rebel, and a recluse”⁴¹. These archetypes were present in real life schools as well, establishing the representations even stronger. Robert Crosnoe’s study of high school peer culture in the U.S. discusses how high schools work like societies with their own rules and norms. He also highlights the “relations between the peer cultures of high schools and the larger youth culture”, meaning that those two are very tightly linked and influence each other. Most teenagers recognize the archetypes and can place themselves into them.⁴² There is a rather large amount of studies made of peer culture in American high schools, and how important that is in creating power structures and social relationships⁴³. The nerds, the jocks, and the popular ones are still part of the American school culture. These same established teenage characters have been used for decades now, and many contemporary movies, such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012), and television series like *The O.C.* (2003–2007), present the same stereotypical personas when it comes to youth culture.

According to Murray Milner, nerds are often at the bottom of the social hierarchy in American high schools⁴⁴, which is visible in popular culture products as well. Interestingly, Mary Bucholtz argues that nerds are not the “socially isolated misfits” they often are depicted as, but actually have an important role in the of American school environment being “competent members of a distinctive and oppositionally defined community of practice”⁴⁵. With this she states that nerds are vital in school environments, acting as a healthy counterbalance in the larger youth culture. Because

⁴¹ “The Breakfast Club”, *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088847/> (accessed March 28, 2017).

⁴² Robert Crosnoe, *Fitting In, Standing Out: Navigating the Social Challenges of High School to Get an Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 39–43. Quote from page 41.

⁴³ See e.g. Penelope Eckert, *Jocks and burnouts: Social identity in the high school* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989) and Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler, *Peer power: Preadolescent culture and identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

⁴⁴ Murray Milner, Jr., *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 36.

⁴⁵ Mary Bucholtz, “Why Be Normal?: Language and Identity Practices in a Community of Nerd Girls,” *Language in Society* 28, no. 2 (1999): 211.

of the leading role the United States has in culture globally, these archetypes are widely known – Hollywood-produced youth films are popular across the world. American popular culture has spread almost everywhere, introducing certain cultural elements and ways of thinking, possibly changing the original culture of other countries.

In the past the word nerd was used to mock and ridicule someone; identifying oneself as a nerd was mostly not smart. When computers started to become more common in the late 1980s, people had to change their attitudes towards both technology and nerd culture.⁴⁶ At first computers were and a new and possibly threatening concept, people had difficulties deciding how to relate to this technology. According to Sherry Turkle and her book *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, people did not know how to react to computers because they were uncertain about this technology and its abilities. They often thought computers were in a way alive, which then blurred the boundaries between humans and machines.⁴⁷ Not understanding computers and seeing them almost as a threat meant that people who were good with these machines, and even liked them, were also seen as weird and difficult to understand. Kendall continues this thought, arguing that it reinforced the nerd stereotype, and adds:

– – the stereotype of the nerd polices the boundary dividing the human from the not-human. Like most liminal figures, the nerd threatens the very boundary he protects, through his ongoing demonstration of the close relationship possible between the human and the not-human. Despite continuing negative aspects, the figure of the nerd also entices through the promise of power arising from the control of computers. The increasing number of contexts within which people encounter computers increases the tension along the boundary between human and machine.⁴⁸

The relationship nerds had with computers appeared to give both a negative and positive image to the rest of the society, as well as to nerds themselves. Knowing how to use this developing technology gave nerds a certain power and status, but at the same time made them almost not part of the human race, and more of machines themselves.

⁴⁶ Kendall, "Nerd Nation," 263–264, 274–276.

⁴⁷ Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, 20th anniversary ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 155–172, 186–190.

⁴⁸ Kendall, "Nerd Nation", 263.

People who had skills with computers, especially the so-called “hackers” were perceived as societal outcasts. However, nowadays these people are depicted as very important elements in the development of technology and the Internet. The first hackers were students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the U.S. to whom computers became a passion from the 1970s onward⁴⁹. According to Gere, they formed a subculture “consisting of young men dedicated to undertaking elegant ‘hacks’ ... finding out what computers were capable of”⁵⁰, being extremely interested in this new technology and what it could offer. A hacker was seen as a stereotypical nerd representation who was unsocial but understood everything about computers and programming, and preferred the company of machines to people⁵¹. In the 1980s hackers started to be connected with criminality, after some of these enthusiasts used computers to illegally access other computers and ended up being prosecuted⁵². This criminal image is still vivid in the contemporary world, in addition to hackers often being related to “Internet trolls” who aim to prank other users and cause mayhem⁵³. Already in the 1980s Hollywood produced movies where a hacker type was the main character, e.g. *Tron* (1982) and *Wargames* (1983), but these did not create positive connotations about hackers or the new technology overall – instead they reinforced the fears connected to this development⁵⁴.

Computers started to gain a bigger role in everyday life as the 1980s proceeded. Businesses and the academic world started to use them first, and slowly after normal households began to acquire more technical kitchen appliances and finally computers too. Kendall notes that this “provoked a reconsideration of the meanings of computer use, and a reconceptualization of the stereotype of the nerd”⁵⁵. Soon employers needed to hire nerds if they wanted to keep up with the times and succeed. This made nerds highly wanted, as they were already accustomed to using computers and technology, after spending years learning. The bullied outcasts became appreciated, as they knew something others did not. Soon after popular culture began to admire and idealize nerds as well. For instance, the first *Matrix* film came out in 1999

⁴⁹ Turkle, *The Second Self*, 186–188.

⁵⁰ Gere, *Digital Culture*, 136.

⁵¹ Matrix, *Cyberpop*, 65–66.

⁵² Gere, *Digital Culture*, 194–196.

⁵³ Coleman, “Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls,” 99–101.

⁵⁴ Gere, *Digital Culture*, 183–184.

⁵⁵ Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 263–264. Quote from page 264.

making nerds more wanted: the main character is a hacker who saves the world, instead of breaking the law through his rebellious actions.⁵⁶

In addition, J. Patrick Williams argues about the importance of the Internet as a space for certain subcultures, especially when it comes to being a part of a larger community and for creating one's identity⁵⁷. Nerds as a subculture rely heavily on the Internet as their home base, connecting like-minded people across physical borders and offering a place to express themselves, thus making nerdism a digital subculture. As I have been explaining in this chapter, the connection between nerds and the Internet is clear and rather fundamental, and it is safe to claim the Internet is the true medium for – contemporary – nerds.

To return to the nerd stereotype, I will introduce Stuart Hall's ideas about contesting old representations. One way to do this is replacing previously negatively depicted things by positive ones. Through this process, being different is made accepted. This replacing does not necessarily mean overcoming or even lessening the old stereotypes, but it can still create new kinds of discourses when it comes to certain groups or individuals, which can then challenge the old representations.⁵⁸ Changes like these are visible in nerd culture. People identifying as nerds have started to create a more positive image of themselves, but even more so it has been done by media and popular culture. As technology has developed further and become more common, it is not a bad or a weird thing to know how to use it – in fact it is essential when wanting to succeed in life. Another way is to turn old stereotypes around⁵⁹. For instance, make nerds the heroes who save the day, instead of being illegal hackers or bullied outsiders. There has been a surprisingly large amount of films made from comic books in the past years, which has also brought nerd culture into mainstream – comic books have been thought to be something only nerds are interested in. Hall's third strategy for challenging old representations "locates itself *within* the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to *contest it from within*", being more focused on the types of depictions, not bringing something new

⁵⁶ Matrix, *Cyberpop*, 66–71.

⁵⁷ J. Patrick Williams, "Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 2 (2006): 174–175, 178–180.

⁵⁸ Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'," 262–263.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 260–261.

into the discourse. This strategy understands there will be no winners when talking about interpretation, because those are continuously in flux.⁶⁰ This connects to the third humor strategy I am discussing in this thesis, which I will explain in chapter 2.2.

Above I have explained the background of nerd culture and nerds, and how they are widely depicted. These established representations create a basis for understanding the changes that have happened during the last decades. When I talk about nerds and their representation I mean this older image – I will mention the contemporary representation clearly when referring to or explaining it. In addition, to refer everyone outside the nerd culture and community I will use the word “non-nerd”, for lack of a better term. I will discuss the modern nerd representation in detail in chapters 4, 5 and 6 when I analyze my data. Today’s nerds are not just people who can be picked out because of the way they look, but “normal” looking, and working in every sector of the society, sometimes even being popular or admired. However, the old stereotypes and representations are also still alive, fueling the ridicule of nerds.

⁶⁰ Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” 263–264. Quote from page 263.

2. Theoretical Framework

I will be using humor studies and meme studies to contextualize my analysis and to discuss my materials. Superiority theory from humor studies in particular will be important for my research. Meme studies is currently very much evolving as a field, offering a great way to understand these products of Internet culture in large. These two theoretical approaches will provide a versatile framework for my case study. Meme studies will help me discuss and contextualize the type of materials I am using, and humor studies will aid in interpreting and analyzing the memes, providing the backbone of the analysis.

The theoretical philosophy, through which I see my research, is humanistic and can be linked to social constructionism. As briefly mentioned earlier, it refers to the idea that reality and the way we see things is constructed and created by people – they do not exist as a default. In my case study, this signifies that the meanings and interpretations linked to nerds as a social phenomenon are not universal truths, but constructed by each culture and society, and nerds themselves. Thus, these meanings can be changed if wanted, as they are not set facts. Social constructionism as a theoretical philosophy pays special attention to the time and place of the meanings and ideals discussed, and I, similarly, find this type of approach suitable for understanding the swiftly changing world of Internet memes.⁶¹

In fact, Limor Shifman recommends studying memes as “socially constructed public discourses”⁶² to help understand the different perspectives and voices used in them. Memes, thus, are another type of audiovisual or textual culture that illustrates how that society perceived a certain topic during that time. This is the way I am looking at the memes analyzed in this thesis. Nerd memes tell how nerds are discussed on the Internet and, in this case study, especially how humor plays a large role in these discussions.

⁶¹ Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 2–5.

⁶² Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 8.

2.1 Meme Studies

Memes have always been part of cultures – the Internet did not create memes – but digital culture changed the basic idea of them⁶³. The word “meme” comes from biologist Richard Dawkins, who used it in his book *The Selfish Gene* already in 1976, to define small components of “cultural transmission”, which spread between people through imitation. As a scientist, Dawkins linked his memes to genes, as he was talking about cultural changes in societies using evolutionary theories. According to him, memes change and vary – like genes – to adapt to new situations and to survive.⁶⁴ It needs to be noted, however, that his term was established long before the arrival of Internet and digital culture⁶⁵. Recent academics have still found it suitable to use when studying these contemporary cultural elements.

The role memes have in today’s online society seems to be important. They are widely used across the Internet, sometimes making an appearance in more traditional media or advertisements. Internet memes are a vital part of contemporary culture, as they comment on current topics and trends. They show what the public is interested in and what things concern them, or what they find ridiculous in their societies. Memes might look like nonsense or just another unimportant thing on the Internet, but according to Limor Shifman they can demonstrate cultural and social systems on a deeper level. She states that memes can be seen as “(post)modern folklore”, as they spread people’s values and ideas through visual elements.⁶⁶ Memes are not shared and created by just nerds or young people, but politicians and companies as well. For instance, during the 2012 presidential election in the United States Barack Obama’s campaign team used memes to a large extent, attracting especially younger audiences⁶⁷. The field still being rather new means that definitions or other practices are not yet completely established. Some interesting topics in meme studies have e.g.

⁶³ Shifman, *Memes*, 24.

⁶⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1976]), 189–193.

⁶⁵ Shifman, *Memes*, 17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5–6, 13–15.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 120–122.

been to research memes as genre⁶⁸, how memes build collective identities in online communities⁶⁹, or what makes a meme successful on social media⁷⁰.

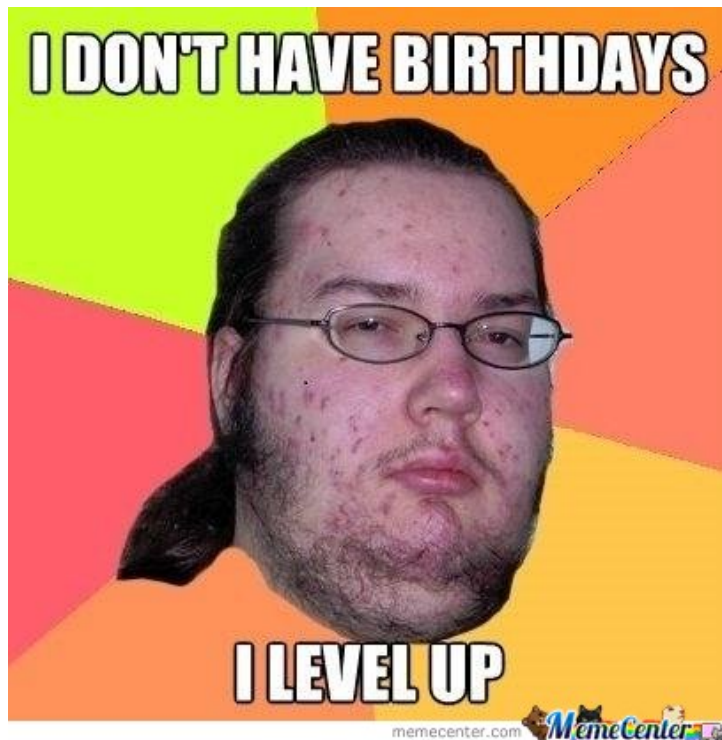


Image 1. Source: <https://www.memecenter.com/fun/111242/I-Dont-Have-Birthdays-I-Level-Up>

The term meme can refer to a vast amount of things, but here I see them simply as images with text on them, which are shared on the Internet (see Image 1 for an example). In this case study, memes often include a joke concerning nerds. Not all memes are humorous, however, but it has been noted that humor is one of the key elements in memetic content⁷¹, and it is often what people expect from a meme. Shifman explains memes and their usage rather thoroughly in her book *Memes in Digital Culture*. She defines memes to be “groups of content units with common characteristics” and continues to define Internet memes in more detail as follows:

⁶⁸ See e.g. Bradley Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, “Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape,” *new media & society* 17, no. 11 (2015): 1886–1906.

⁶⁹ See e.g. Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, “Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan’s /b/ board,” *new media & society* (2015): 1–19.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Viriya Taecharungroj and Pitchanut Nueangjamnong, “Humor 2.0: Styles and Types of Humor and Virality of Memes on Facebook,” *Journal of Creative Communications* 10, no. 3 (2015): 288–302.

⁷¹ Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, “Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production,” in *A New Literacies Sampler Vol. 29*, eds. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 209.

a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which b) were created with awareness of each other, and c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.⁷²

This is the definition I use when I am talking about a meme. Memes are always connected to their contexts, they do not exist outside of it and cannot be understood without the encoded messages they have. Shifman notes that memes can be used to build shared values in digital culture. She also distinguishes memes from “virals”, but notes that the two are sometimes used interchangeably or at least share similar qualities. A viral is not altered by the users sharing it; it is the original content that is being spread between people. A meme, then, can be an alteration of this viral: someone remixing the viral into something a little different. Shifman reminds that great number of memes start as virals, yet do not live long, but memes made out of them might.⁷³

An interesting matter to notice is how “the meme is the best concept to encapsulate some of the most fundamental aspects of the Internet in general, and of the so-called participatory or Web 2.0 culture in particular”⁷⁴, as Shifman puts it. Participating in the digital world and its communities is a big part of contemporary digital culture, and memes are a product of it. Wiggins and Bowers list three reasons why memes should be seen as artifacts: memes exist both in digital world and human minds, they tell us about the people who create them, and they show how content in digital culture is produced for certain purposes. Therefore, memes highlight the connections between individuals when creating cultural elements and especially social structures.⁷⁵ I argue that this is visible in nerd memes in my data, as they create social hierarchies and representations with the humor strategies used in them, thus greatly influencing how nerds are discussed in both online and offline world.

Mememes can be perceived to transfer cultural information between individuals, and eventually create new collectively shared values. This is an important point to take into consideration. The role and power memes have in contemporary culture is large. Shifman argues that the impact memes have is on the “macro level”, as they change

⁷² Shifman, *Mememes*, 41.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 38, 56–62, 66–74

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁵ Wiggins and Bowers, “Mememes as genre,” 1891.

how people or groups think or act, like any cultural or communicative element does (e.g. books, articles, films). This is how the Internet works: it offers a place for users to come and create content, and then spread it to others, thus spreading new ideas and values. The specialty of the Internet concerning this is that the spreading and exchanging does not just happen inside one society or culture, but across man-made borders. Internet also enables materials to spread fast – “Internet fame” usually happens in a matter of hours and dies equally fast.⁷⁶ Nerd memes discussed here help spreading the subculture wider, and as it is closely linked to the United States they also spread American cultural elements and ideas. Nerd culture happens on the Internet, and spreads via it across traditional cultural borders.

Contemporary digital culture, and Western cultures overall, value individualism, which is something Internet users are able to demonstrate when creating content. Making and sharing memes is a way to show one’s individuality and uniqueness, while still being a part of a larger community. Both traits are highly valued.⁷⁷ I argue that nerds, usually being quite Internet and technology savvy, use this to their advantage. They are being themselves on platforms that allow them to do so, often showing pride in their culture and creating global communities of like-minded people. Internet offers nerds a somewhat safe environment where they can be their unique selves. However, due to the anonymity the Internet offers, it is also easy for people to mock each other – e.g. non-nerds to mock nerds – without the consequences one would have in real life. Anonymity on the Internet has been studied in the past years, and it seems this element offers both positive and negative effects⁷⁸. In my case study, both of these are visible as well. However, as Internet is the home of the nerds, provoking or ridiculing them online might backfire. Hackers and trolls are known to have lashed back at both individuals, groups and even companies, who stepped on their feet. Cybercrimes, hackings, and virtual bullying are difficult for police to react on, due to the anonymity and untraceability of the

⁷⁶ Shifman, *Memes*, 18.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁸ See e.g. Kimberly M. Cristopherson, “The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: “On the Internet, Nobody Knows You’re a Dog”,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 23 (2007): 3038–3056.

online world.⁷⁹ Thus, nerds are not as hopeless of victims online as they might have been in real life in the past.

In addition to the definition of an Internet meme introduced before, it is worth adding something to it when it comes to memes that include humorous elements. Patrick Davidson specifies this definition by stating that “an Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission”⁸⁰. He continues by suggesting how seeing memes as jokes helps to understand their specialty, but highlights that not all memes are humorous. This specialty refers to how easily memes, or jokes, spread on the Internet and are visible to a vast amount of people, staying preserved for a longer time than traditionally told jokes. Memes are also easily copied or altered, due to their existence in the digital world.⁸¹ Humor has in fact found to be one of the key elements that can make a meme popular. Content including some type of jokes or humorous elements is the kind people share the most.⁸² Shifman separates three types of humor: playful, incongruent, and superior. Of these superiority is the most noticeable in my case study, yet playfulness can be distinguished as well. In playful memes humor is used like a game that a user can enjoy, but which also includes an awareness of actual social life. Superiority, however, is more important for my research. Shifman argues that connecting humorous elements with superiority could have a key part when users create remakes of memetic material: people like to watch content that makes them feel superior, and to create their own material that ridicules others – thus making them superior.⁸³

2.2 Superiority Theory in Humor

Humor studies has a very long history as a research field, and its theories are often divided into three: superiority theory, incongruity theory and relief theory. Of these superiority theory is a suitable when studying social order and valuing oneself

⁷⁹ Coleman, “Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls,” 109–114.

⁸⁰ Patrick Davidson, “The Language of Internet Memes,” in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 122.

⁸¹ Ibid., 122–123.

⁸² Knobel and Lankshear, “Online Memes,” 209.

⁸³ Shifman, *Memes*, 67, 79–81.

through jokes.⁸⁴ This theory fits my research the best, which is why I will discuss it the most in this chapter. The humor in my data is often using ridicule to either mock nerds or to empower them, turning the ridiculing around. Social hierarchies and maintaining or challenging them is also very present in my study.

Incongruity theory is often used in linguistics, and relief theory in psychology. Incongruity theory was born as a response to superiority theory and Thomas Hobbes's views of it. This theory states that people laugh at things that are somehow incompatible and thus funny, for example a man in women's clothing. Relief theory states that laughter is created when a certain tension is released; creating an enjoyable physical sensation that makes us laugh.⁸⁵ Sheila Lintott summarizes these three theories by stating that incongruity theory explains the cognitive side of laughter, relief theory the physical side, and superiority theory how laughter can create intense feelings⁸⁶.

According to superiority theory ridiculing and demoting others creates laughter. This makes the joker feel better, superior. Some scholars think of superiority theory as somewhat questionable and grim because it presents humor in a negative light, as a way to mock others. However, as Michael Billig notes in his book *Laughter and Ridicule. Towards Social Critique of Humour*, superior humor is a way to understand social order and hierarchies, which have been the basis for more contemporary humor studies. This theory is seen as the oldest of the three humor theories. Both Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greek discussed superiority in humor, although their thoughts were "scattered observations" about larger issues within the society. The first proper humor theorist is thought to be Thomas Hobbes, a 17th century English philosopher. He linked laughter to overall human behavior, and thought of humor as a psychological matter, placing ridicule in the center of how humans are.⁸⁷ In the past humor and especially ridicule were seen as negative things, but currently humor's roles in society and social relations are not depicted as dreadful.

⁸⁴ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule. Towards a Social Critique of Humor* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 38.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 57, 62–64, 86.

⁸⁶ Sheila Lintott, "Superiority in Humor Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 4 (2016): 347.

⁸⁷ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 38–39.

As Billig summarizes Hobbes's thoughts, seeing someone who is in a way lesser than we are – e.g. belongs to a subculture the majority finds embarrassing, such as nerds – makes us feel better about ourselves, bringing us enjoyment. Hobbes's thoughts of humor thus link to the humor strategies I aim to study in the context of nerds: the ways humor is used in nerd memes and what that accomplishes. I aim to focus on the social aspects of laughter and humor, as especially ridicule and preserving social order are tightly linked, whereas e.g. Hobbes did not take this matter into consideration. Billig notes that humor theories are about more than just humor – they also discuss about cultures and societies.⁸⁸ I argue that the humor used in nerd memes tells about nerd culture, the way it is perceived in contemporary societies, and also about participatory digital culture.

As stated by Billig, humor, especially ridicule, is a vital part in maintaining social life. Social life defines rules that one has to follow if they wish to be part of that life.⁸⁹ Being different has always been a laughing matter, because those who break social rules are odd – thus it is acceptable to laugh at them. Humor often tries to strengthen the current situation in the society, by either ridiculing a certain part of the society or laughing at those who are seen as outsiders.⁹⁰ Nerds often enjoy things that the majority does not care about, e.g. certain type of popular culture, science, or technology, which makes them odd and embarrassing.

Billig divides ridiculing humor into two types: *disciplinary* and *rebellious* humor. Disciplinary humor aims to keep social rules intact by ridiculing and joking about the ones breaking these rules. Rebellious humor does the opposite and mocks the social rules. This is often seen as questioning or opposing those in charge. Billig argues that laughter and obedience are therefore linked. Humor and hierarchies are connected because humor can reveal different positions in social hierarchy. The ones with higher status can ridicule and mock the ones with lower status, and in that way show who has more power in the society. The ones in lower positions can, however, question this social order by mocking their superiors, showing insurgency or dissatisfaction with the overall rules. Rebellious humor challenges the rationality and

⁸⁸ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 7–8, 50–54, 199.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 200, 215.

⁹⁰ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 12.

necessity of established social rules and norms.⁹¹ These two are humor strategies, ways to create jokes and laughter. Both are visible in my case study, in addition to a third strategy. The third is *reverse* humor, where someone of lower social status laughs at themselves to show the artificiality of the superior. It is used as a counter strategy when ridiculing social hierarchies. I am using Simon Weaver's arguments concerning this third humor strategy. According to Weaver, reverse humor – self-mockery⁹² being one example – is a discourse that is used in an opposite way than what it originally meant. It is often produced to highlight or challenge established ways of talking and thinking about a certain issue.⁹³ Weaver himself discusses this reverse discourse in the context of anti-racist comedy, but the same idea can be applied to my study. Both themes deal with minority groups that are turning stereotypes and discourses around via self-mockery. This, additionally, links to Hall's third counter strategy when challenging old representations. These are the three strategies at the core of understanding the humor in nerd memes.

Cultural context creates certain rules or codes according to which one must act, or they make themselves subjects to ridicule. A sense of humor is commonly shared with people who come from mutual places and starting points. This is why it can be difficult to explain a joke to someone who is not part of the group, or to translate it to another language.⁹⁴ Nerd humor might thus be impossible to understand for someone who does not know about the culture and its sense of humor. In addition, it is possible to build and raise one's own ego and social position by making fun of others, and through that make oneself superior⁹⁵. The difference between humor and negative ridicule is not clear in this case, as it very much depends on the context and even the tone of voice to how the message is received. What you might find a funny and teasing joke might be an insulting and low comment to the person you are talking to.⁹⁶ In these occasions cultural differences are also an important factor to consider. Laughter and humor are ambivalent and tightly connected to the context and cultural settings. This is, in addition, why humor is a difficult topic to study.

⁹¹ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 45–46, 202–203.

⁹² I use the words "self-mockery" and "self-ridicule" interchangeably in this study, as they mean the same kind of humor.

⁹³ Simon Weaver, "The 'Other' Laughs Back: Humor and Resistance in Anti-racist Comedy," *Sociology* 44, no. 1 (2010): 31–32.

⁹⁴ Critchley, *On Humour*, 73–74.

⁹⁵ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 220.

⁹⁶ Critchley, *On Humour*, 67.

Taking this into consideration, I will try to explain my interpretations of the nerd memes as carefully and clearly as possible, not assuming everyone will understand the jokes the same way I do.

These two theories provide the framework through which I will analyze my data. Meme studies help me to contextualize the nerd memes into contemporary digital culture in large, and explain why some memes are constructed in certain ways. Humor studies create the understanding for the humor used in the memes. Superiority theory, along with the three humor strategies introduced earlier, aid in interpreting and analyzing how these memes use humor and what that accomplishes.

3. Materials and Methods

This study is a qualitative, thematic analysis of memes collected from the Internet. This study is also an inductive research, as the topic is not widely examined so far. I focus on the themes found in the chosen data and their context. I aim to study the memes as a form of cultural participation and user-generated content. The analysis is text driven, and the methods and research questions emerged from the chosen materials. In this chapter I will introduce the memes I analyze and the ways I conducted the research. I start with explaining the chosen memes and their source, and continue with laying out my research method: content analysis.

3.1 Internet Memes

My materials consist of 300 Internet memes, collected from an image-hosting site *MemeCenter.com*. The site offers a platform where registered users can upload memes, which can then be liked, shared further or commented on. Anyone can see the memes and the comments left under them, but only registered users are able to participate in the discussion or like the images. MemeCenter was established in January 2012, and has about 2.8 million monthly users⁹⁷. The site hosts various types of memes a user can scroll through, or they can find them tagged under certain keywords using a search function. Users can also create their own memes using simple meme and GIF generators, and then share the content either on the site or somewhere else. GIFs are animated images, which are often used as short videos, usually showing a snippet taken from a longer video. The site operates as a platform for hosting and creating memetic content. MemeCenter is a moderated site, meaning that the editors of the site actively keep an eye on possibly hateful content or users, and it is possible to report such things as well. Registering to the site is free, but the terms of service state that a registered user has to be at least 13 years old. The site ranks “top users” based on their activity and success. It is also possible to earn badges and trophies, which the editors either give to users who have posted successful memes, or the users can find hidden in the site.⁹⁸ In addition, the editors pick memes to be presented of the front page. Getting your memes up on the front

⁹⁷ On February 22, 2017.

⁹⁸ “MemeCenter”, *Know Your Meme*, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/memecenter> and *Meme Center Wiki*, http://memecenter.wikia.com/wiki/Meme_Center_Wiki (accessed February 22, 2017).

page is often seen as the main goal when posting any content. This is visible when looking e.g. at the comments under the memes.

MemeCenter is operating from the United States, which means it acts under the U.S laws. The content on the site is therefore aimed for American audiences, and rises from an American cultural context. However, the users can be from anywhere in the world, due to the transnational quality of the Internet. It is impossible to say where the people posting these nerd memes are from. What is important concerning this thesis is how these memes and the representation of a nerd can be interpreted and perceived – not *who* created them.

The memes were collected from MemeCenter after I performed a search using the term “nerd”. A user can tag a meme they are posting with different tags, in this case “nerd”. The search came up with 338 memes on the day it was performed⁹⁹. I chose to include the first 300 memes of that search into this study. It needs to be noted that some memes in this chosen amount are the same ones, or almost the same, but posted by different users. All of the memes were posted between 2012 and 2016. It is important to notice that the Internet is very fast paced, memes do not live long, and a user might delete what they have posted. This is why a search on an image-hosting site can give very different results depending on what day it is performed. Some sites also use algorithms to personalize such searches, again giving different results for different people. For this reason I saved all the memes I analyze here, to secure I have access to them during the entirety of this study.

The majority of these memes are using a typical layout: an image with two lines of text. There are also images with less or more text lines, images without text at all, as well as some comic strips. A fraction of the memes are or include animated GIFs. The entirety of this data is used to see what nerd themed memes talk about on a larger scale. There were six memes in the initial search that were only visible to registered users, as they contained sexual or otherwise adult material¹⁰⁰, which is why I left them outside the final data. Otherwise I did not leave anything out. Most

⁹⁹ The search was performed on November 12, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ So-called “Not safe for work” material, often referred to as NSFW. See *Oxford American English Dictionary*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/nsfw> (accessed February 20, 2017).

of the material is humorous, making it suitable to use with my research questions. However, not all of the memes include a joke or otherwise humorous elements, but they still provide a background understanding to this memetic scene. Each meme has a title given to it by the user submitting it, and the likes, shares and comments the meme has are also visible. Some memes have hundreds of comments and thousands of likes, some only a few or not at all. I do not, however, focus on the popularity of these memes, but solely on the content of them.

Memes tend to have recurring themes and elements, which help to categorize them as memetic content. Limor Shifman's research on viral videos concluded six common elements, three of which can be seen in my case study as well. She lists the six as "a focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness, and whimsical content"¹⁰¹. The three relevant to my case study are flawed masculinity, humor, and whimsical content. Despite Shifman studying videos, these same themes, or elements, are visible in my image memes as well. By "flawed masculinity" Shifman refers to how men in her materials were shown as not meeting the expectations contemporary society sets for them. This element is visible in the nerd memes and I will discuss it more in chapter 4. "Humor" is a very commonly used feature in memes and can be divided into different types, or categories already mentioned in chapter 2.1. Lastly, "whimsical" content has amusing elements to it, for instance a person acting in a foolish way.¹⁰² Shifman notes that YouTube videos often include several of these elements, and I argue that nerd memes do too.

After just the first glance into the memes it is visible how large of a role humor plays in them. Especially irony and sarcasm are shining through these memes. Rod Martin describes these humor types, used especially in "conversational humor", according to the definitions made by psychologists Debra Long and Arthur Graesser, as: "Sarcasm – aggressive humor that targets an individual rather than an institution"; and "Irony – the speaker expresses a statement in which the literal meaning is opposite to the intended meaning"¹⁰³. These definitions are not the only ones given to these types of humor, but in this research I refer to them as above. Humor is something people

¹⁰¹ Shifman, *Memes*, 74.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 73–85.

¹⁰³ Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 13.

often link to memes. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear's study found humor to be one of the main elements in popular memes, especially when it came to their lifespan.¹⁰⁴ The new era of nerd culture also builds itself on humor. Their humor often expresses the inner culture in relation to other groups, non-nerds. Nerd culture may have used similar humor already before, but as my materials are from the 2010s I am focusing on the contemporary form of it. I acknowledge that my data is in no case the only truth or perspective into this culture, and that every one of these humorous memes can be interpreted in different ways. I have tried to take this factor into consideration when conducting this research.

I argue that nerd memes started being more visible in mainstream culture when digital culture began to overall become more popular and advanced. The establishment of social network sites and image-hosting sites made it easy for nerds – and non-nerds – to create and share this kind of content, making it available for everyone. Humor might be one of the reasons why people share memes: most of us would like to be seen as the funny one, and sharing funny pictures can create that image. The reasons behind this need can of course vary.¹⁰⁵

3.2 Content Analysis and Categorization

To analyze my materials, I am using qualitative content analysis. I categorized all of the memes into 10 categories, using the software *Atlas.ti*. It is designed to help perform a qualitative content analysis, especially when using vast amounts of texts or images. I used the software to code the memes into categories, using certain keywords as codes. These helped to perceive the main themes among the memes. My analysis and method are part of digital humanities, which is a modern way to collect and analyze materials e.g. in cultural studies. Digital humanities are somewhat hard to define, as it is still an evolving field of research and includes several aspects. It is said to exist in the “intersection between the humanities and information technologies”¹⁰⁶, meaning that this field uses technology and the possibilities it brings, to study the humanities. This includes materials that exist digitally, or using

¹⁰⁴ Knobel and Lankshear, “Online Memes,” 209–211.

¹⁰⁵ Shifman, *Memes*, 96.

¹⁰⁶ Bryan Carter, *Digital Humanities: Current Perspective, Practices, and Research* (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2013), x.

software or apps to conduct a research. The digitalized era we are living in also makes it possible for scholars to easily communicate and collaborate with each other.¹⁰⁷ My research is part of this new field because I am both using materials that are a product of the new participatory digital culture – which is proving to have an important role in the contemporary world – and software to help analyze these materials. It needs to be noted, however, that software and technology cannot create the analysis itself. Interpretations are always made by a human mind, not by a machine.¹⁰⁸ Computers and software like Atlas.ti only help to count numbers or create categories to get a better and summarized view of a large data.

In his book *Content Analysis* Klaus Krippendorff explains the method simply as:

Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.¹⁰⁹

In other words, content analysis is a method that creates interpretations and conclusions from different materials, to help understand that topic or phenomenon in its context. By “text” Krippendorff does not mean just literate text, but all sorts of materials that can be interpreted as such, for example images or symbols.¹¹⁰ Content analysis as a method is often used when a scholar wants to study what kinds of themes are related to the chosen data. It is a commonly used method especially in cultural studies and social sciences. Contemporary content analysis differentiates from the one used during earlier years, one of the differences being that digital materials are often analyzed with the help of computers. Contemporary studies in this method also research rather large amounts of data. This has forced content analysis to recreate its methodological aspects.¹¹¹

Context usually affects the way data is interpreted¹¹². In my case study, this context is discussed with the help of meme studies and nerd culture, as they create the background to understanding the memes. Content analysis is often divided into two:

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., x–xii.

¹⁰⁸ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis. An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004), 23, 125–127.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 18–19.

¹¹¹ Ibid., xvii–xxi.

¹¹² Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*, 86.

qualitative analysis is interested in different interpretations and point of views, whereas quantitative analysis focuses on measurable factors. In qualitative content analysis reading and interpreting the chosen data can raise new questions as the analysis proceeds. These are then reinterpreted, taking the contexts and previous research into consideration. This circle of reinterpreting and raising new questions is usually repeated, ending when the scholar thinks they have found the answers to their research questions.¹¹³ In my study this process was done with the help of Atlas.ti. The categories, in which the memes were coded, were the result of reaching a so-called saturation point, meaning that reinterpreting came to a point where there were no new themes or ideas to be found from the memes.

Qualitative content analysis has several approaches, e.g. discourse analysis, ethnographic content analysis, and rhetorical analysis. All of these different approaches are connected by the idea of interpreting the chosen materials. Content analysis is very focused on the context of the studied data, and recognizes how important it is in understanding and interpreting the data.¹¹⁴ In this thesis I am using a thematic content analysis, which means that the themes studied emerged from the data itself. First I uploaded all 300 memes into Atlas.ti. After initial inductive research, I created 10 categories based on the themes that were visible in the memes, and then coded each meme with the categories that suited them. Each meme has more than one code tagged to it. After all the memes were coded into these categories, I noticed they could be divided into four smaller groups, two of which seemed to be the most occurring and important ones. In content analysis the materials are often coded or categorized into groups, especially when the research is thematic. These categories are then reduced into a smaller number, and eventually there are an attainable number of categories to discuss.¹¹⁵

The 10 categories I created were: arrogant, definition, fake/wannabe, girl nerd, intelligence, lack of relationships, nerdy interests, nerdy looks, proud, and successful relationships. These were then divided into four groups: Definitions, Girl Nerds, Nerd as a Loser, and Nerd as a Superior. The Definitions and Girl Nerds groups both

¹¹³ Ibid., 87–89.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 16–17.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 167–168.

include the category with the same name. The Loser group includes fake/wannabe, lack of relationships, nerdy interests, and nerdy looks categories. The Superior group includes arrogant, intelligence, proud, and successful relationships categories. To make these terms clearer: the 10 categories present the themes that are visible in the memes overall, whereas groups collect similar categories under mutual argumentation strategies. The groups also show the strategies that are used to create humor in these memes. The Loser group links to disciplinary humor and self-mockery, the Superior to rebellious humor and self-mockery, and the Girl Nerds to disciplinary humor.

Content analysis helps to visualize, find similarities between, and categorize the chosen materials, but it also aids in noticing deviations¹¹⁶. Here the similarities created the two main themes: Loser and Superior. The most visible deviation – Girl Nerds – constructed the third one. The Loser and Superior groups were the most visible and important. I will discuss these two and the categories inside them in more detail in chapters 4 and 5. The Girl Nerds group was not large in number, but because it offers an interesting viewpoint to nerd culture, I will in addition discuss these memes in chapter 6. The Definitions group is used to define what a nerd means in this study. I discussed the old stereotypical representation already in chapter 1.2, and will discuss how these memes define and present contemporary nerds more in the analysis chapters.

This categorization presented the main themes in the entire data chosen for this research. The 300 memes showed what kind of topics and qualities are linked to nerds in memes overall on the Internet. I then chose 25 memes – 10 from the Loser group, 10 from the Superior group, and 5 from the Girl Nerds group – for closer analysis, to understand nerd humor in memes more profoundly. The questions rising during the analysis process also made me think why certain categories seemed to exist together, and some not. For instance, arrogant and successful relationships categories were almost always present in the same memes, whereas the latter and fake/wannabe category were never together. I will discuss the most interesting connections concerning these in the analysis chapters. As the titles originally given

¹¹⁶ Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*, 105.

to the memes by Memecenter users were not descriptive of what is in the meme itself, I renamed the 25 memes chosen for the closer analysis to help separate them¹¹⁷. As the amount of memes in total is quite large, I decided only to rename the ones I examined more closely. When the memes were categorized and coded in Atlas.ti, each image was named with a number from 1 to 300.

As mentioned above, one meme can have several codes tagged into it. It is important to note that one meme can belong to both the Loser and the Superior group, which can for instance indicate that the humor used is self-mockery – one of the humor strategies studied in this study. In fact, most memes are part of opposite groups based on the elements they have. I have grouped all the memes based on my interpretation, and I acknowledge someone else can interpret them differently. I, as a researcher and a nerd myself, likely see them in a different way than a non-nerd would. This is why I aim to point out the (visual or textual) elements guiding *my* interpretation of each meme. This might affect the understanding, but it also acknowledges that the memes are indeed open to interpretation.

One more factor that should be taken into consideration when it comes to content analysis, or any method for that matter, is reliability. Kimberly Neuendorf defines it by stating that a research is seen reliable, and thus valid, if someone else can come to the same conclusions when using the same steps as the scholar who conducted the original research. In my case study, this would mean that someone else could see similar categories from the memes when aiming to answer the same questions. However, when it comes to humor, reliability is harder to prove. Humor tends to be very subjective and the person looking at the humorous content creates the interpretation – not the content itself.¹¹⁸ I acknowledge this issue, and have tried to explain my coding and analysis processes with enough detail in order to mitigate that slightly.

To conclude, by using content analysis I was able to find recurring themes from my data. With the help of software, finding these themes from a large amount of memes

¹¹⁷ I will use italics in the titles of these chosen memes in the analysis chapters. See Appendix 1 for the list of the memes and their original URLs.

¹¹⁸ Kimberly A Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), 141, 147.

was accessible and systematic. I divided the 10 most visible categories (themes) into four larger groups. These groups are presenting the humor strategies used in the memes. I will move on to the actual analysis next, starting with the group that has the most memes tagged under it.

4. Nerd as a Loser

Nerd as a Loser is the first group I will take under a closer look, and discuss how it uses humor strategies to create laughter. The Loser group includes memes from four categories: fake/wannabe, lack of relationships, nerdy interests, and nerdy looks. I will discuss the looks, interests, and relationships in separate subchapters, and refer to the fake/wannabe category together with nerdy looks, as they overlap in some extent. It needs to be noted that the fake/wannabe category is also very present in the Girl Nerds group. The reason why I chose to call this group the Loser group is because the word was used several times on the original titles of memes presenting these kinds of themes, and in the comment sections under the memes. Therefore the word seemed to describe the attitudes towards nerds quite well.

Nerd as a Loser memes use disciplinary humor and self-mockery, to either keep the stereotypes alive and hierarchies strong, or to laugh at them with self-irony and sarcasm. All of the categories under the Loser group relate to each other and overlap at least in some degree. For instance, some memes state that nerds do not have romantic relationships because of the way they look and what they like. Additionally, if someone both looks like a stereotypical nerd and likes e.g. cosplaying, it *adds* to the nerdiness. I will take at least one meme per category into closer analysis in each subchapter, and use them as visual examples¹¹⁹. I have chosen these memes because they best represent the most important elements in each category. The overall discussion refers to the entire amount of memes tagged under that category.

The discourse about nerds and their relation to non-nerds is constructed of what Hall describes as “a set of binary oppositions”¹²⁰. Hall discusses racial matters, but I argue that the same logic concerning “Otherness” is visible in the case of nerds as well. The discourse in this case divides nerds and non-nerds into two groups, where nerds are societal outcasts and losers, and non-nerds are “normal” and successful.¹²¹ Nerds are not accepted, whereas non-nerds are. This creates the basis for these Loser type memes: nerds are shown to be deviant from “normal” people.

¹¹⁹ These memes are part of the 25 that I chose for closer analysis.

¹²⁰ Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” 232.

¹²¹ Ibid.

4.1 Nerdy Looks

Memes discussing the physical looks of nerds state that most nerds look the same, and that these looks are not desired. The established stereotypes introduced earlier have been widely circulated through popular culture for decades. No matter how much more nerds are accepted in our contemporary societies, these stereotypes are still living strong. Memes tagged under the nerdy looks category address the stereotypical nerd look. There are five distinguished elements connecting to it: body type, accessories, whiteness, young age, and being a male. These elements create the visual representation of a nerd.

Of these memes 41 are also tagged with the definition category, meaning that physical looks are used to define nerds in these memes. Of the total 300 memes, 185 address the nerdy looks in them, but again, it needs to be noted that one meme can fall under several categories at the same time. I have tagged nerdy looks category in all the memes depicting a stereotypical representation of a nerd. The looks tag can therefore be in both the Loser and Superior group of memes, but used in different ways: the Loser memes ridicule nerdy looks; the Superior memes use self-mockery.

One element creating the stereotypical representation of a nerd in the memes is whiteness. In fact, being a nerd has been linked to being white in previous studies as well. My data supports this claim, because only four memes in the entire 300 depict a black person in them, and a few an Asian person. Otherwise the people in the memes are white (Caucasian), making whiteness a distinctive element of nerdy looks. Based on Lori Kendall's study of online forum users, whiteness was seen as the "default identity" of people on the Internet¹²². In addition, Kendall argues in her 2011 article that white males mainly occupy technology related professions, suggesting that nerds are predominantly white because they tend to hold those positions¹²³. Mary Bucholtz also links whiteness to nerd identities, stating that nerds often avoid participating in "cultural practices that originate across racialized lines," and rather highlight

¹²² Kendall, "“Oh No! I’m a Nerd!” Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum,” *Gender & Society* 14, no.2 (2000): 268.

¹²³ Lori Kendall, "“White and Nerdy”: Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 33, no. 3 (2011): 506.

symbolic elements linked to being white – for instance a certain kind of language use¹²⁴.

The most common meme in the entire data is the so-called “Butthurt Dweller” type, a meme template, which is very important when discussing the nerd representation here. It is an interesting example of memes that are mainly part of the Loser group, but can also be found in memes that show nerds as superior. These memes present a stereotypical, nerdy looking, overweight, white male with bad skin, glasses, and a ponytail. Usually his head is floating on a colorful background, with two or more lines of text. Because the character is rather known among Internet users, the person looking at the meme can easily recognize the reference. The text lines in the image often make this nerd sound like a “know-it-all” and ignorant of society’s norms: he is being conceited and condescending, which makes him sound like “a loser”. These memes ridicule nerds based on the topics that are related to them. Butthurt Dweller is depicted acting superior in a way, but not actually knowing anything about the real world. This makes him ridiculous in the eyes of non-nerds. He is also an exaggerated visual representation of a nerd, making even just his face a source for laughter.

This meme plays a large role in the definition of nerds – especially the physical looks category. There are 73 memes that have the face of Butthurt Dweller in them, making it the most commonly used character in my data. According to meme wiki Know Your Meme¹²⁵ the character is seen as arrogant yet oblivious¹²⁶. These memes discuss various things connected to nerds: looks, interests (e.g. gaming), and unsuccessful relationships. I am discussing these memes under the nerdy looks category, as they are so connected to the stereotypical representation of a nerd, but they do exist in other categories as well. The face of this male nerd has also been made into a drawn cartoon version and added in other types of memes. In most of these occasions the tone is arrogant in a sarcastic way, thus connecting to the arrogant category of the Superior memes in my study. I will discuss these variations more in chapter 5.3.

¹²⁴ Bucholtz, “The Whiteness of Nerds,” 85.

¹²⁵ An Internet wiki site, run by editorial staff, which “researches and documents Internet memes and phenomena.” In 2014 the site was added to the U.S. Library of Congress’s Web Archiving Program. See “About,” *Know Your Meme*, <http://knowyourmeme.com/about> (accessed April 17, 2017).

¹²⁶ “Butthurt Dweller/Gordo Granudo,” *Know Your Meme*, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/butthurt-dweller-gordo-granudo> (accessed March 22, 2017).

One example of the typical Butthurt Dweller meme is *Nerd representation*, which is also tagged with the nerdy interest category. It has a colorful background of orange, yellow, red, and green, and a head shot of a male in the middle. The male is representing a nerd with several of the stereotypical features mentioned earlier. The male has a smug look on his face, looking a little arrogant. There are two lines of text in this meme: “A Life? What level do I unlock that at?” This refers to nerds not having a social life. The nerd here is mixing reality with virtual world by asking what level in a game would offer this “life” for him to use. The meme mocks nerds for the way they look, but also for their interests in gaming and how nerds tend to prioritize virtual life over real life. Using certain representations is perceived as using (symbolic) power, and as Stuart Hall argues: “Stereotyping is key element in this exercise of symbolic violence”¹²⁷. When non-nerds describe nerds with these established stereotypical representations, they are expressing their power. The powerful ones in the society can dictate the widely used discourses.

¹²⁷ Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” 249.

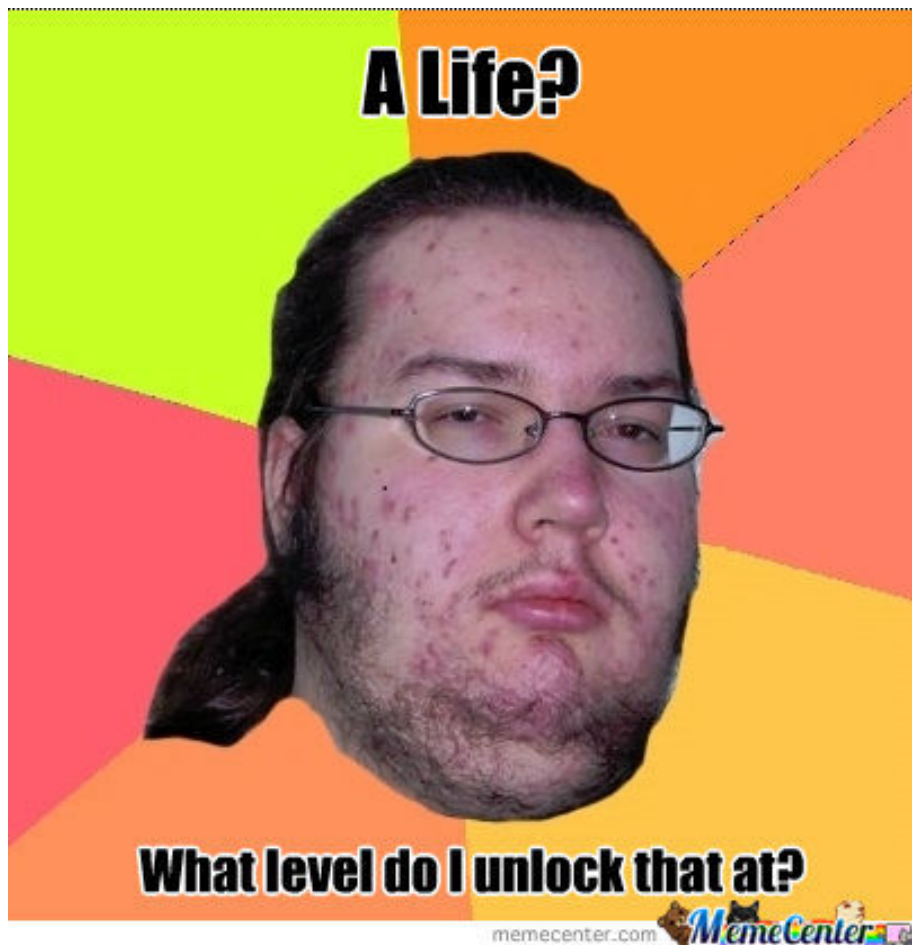


Image 2: Nerd representation.

The male in this meme looks to either be a teenager or in his early twenties, especially because of the acne in his face. Nerds have often been presented as teenagers, especially in popular culture. My data mostly shows nerds as young people, but not always. In our contemporary societies a middle-aged man can also spend his evenings playing online video games. The “original” nerds of the 1970s and 1980s have grown up by now, but might not have lost their nerd identities. There are, of course, new generations of nerds slightly differing from the previous ones, but the same stereotypes still exist. However, as digital culture has developed further and technology is present in various areas of life, being a nerd does not just mean being the stereotypical representation. Today attractive and successful people, even celebrities, can be depicted as nerds, showing that undesired physical looks are not the only quality to make someone a nerd.

Being a nerd is also connected to being a male. In fact, Kendall states that the default interpretation of a nerd is male, because female nerds often have the need to highlight being both girls *and* nerds when defining themselves¹²⁸. This theme is visible in the memes I am analyzing and I will talk about the female nerd dilemma more closely in chapter 6. In my data male nerds are discussed through the ideas of masculinity¹²⁹, in the Loser group memes especially how nerds are failing with qualities connected to masculinity. These memes are also in part redefining the cultural understanding concerning how nerds look like, and what are the wanted masculine qualities in contemporary digital societies.

An interesting example of masculinity is the meme *Pop culture vs. reality*. It discusses nerdy looks in relation to what the society sees as desirable and masculine. The meme consists of two pictures next to each other. The image on the left shows a muscular male model without a shirt, wearing large glasses, and suspenders that keep his opened pants up. He looks into the camera with his mouth slightly open, head tilted to the left. The image looks like it could be in a fashion magazine. Above the image is a text stating that this is how nerds are pictured in movies and television. On the right side is an image showing the head and shoulders of a stereotypical male nerd. He is wearing large glasses as well, has a polo shirt buttoned all the way up, and looks rather thin in his figure. This nerd is smiling wide to the camera showing his braces, and has rather large ears. The colors in the image and the male's glasses give a sense that the picture is from the 1970s or the 1980s. Above this image is a phrase stating that this is how nerds look in real life. The images are meant to be compared.

¹²⁸ Kendall, "Nerd Nation," 262.

¹²⁹ I will define terms concerning masculinity later in this chapter.

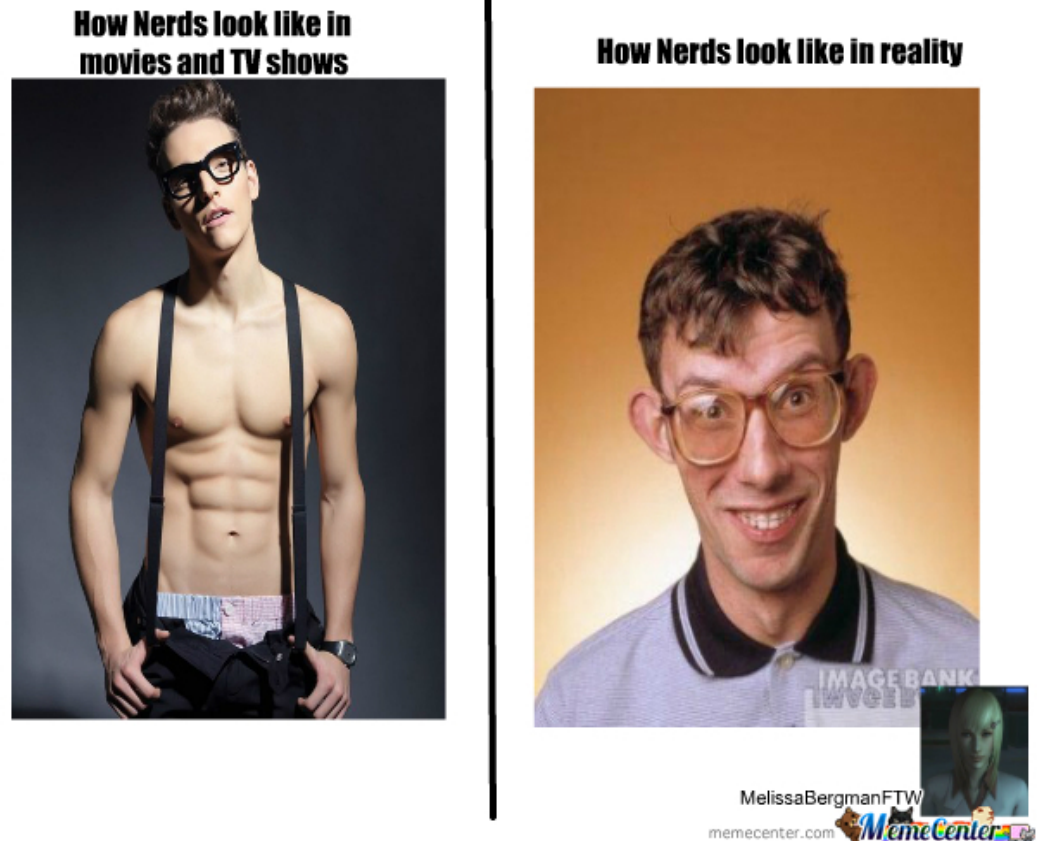


Image 3: Pop culture vs. reality.

This meme is an example of the ways nerds are expected to look. The model looking nerd on the left is how popular culture currently presents nerds, making nerdiness a liked quality. Despite mainstream culture showing nerds as sexualized and “wanted”, thus reproducing the old stereotype, real nerds still do not fulfill the criteria society sets for being accepted. The meme ridicules “real” nerds by comparing them to a male model, showing that good looks are the quality that is most wanted, no matter how “trendy” nerd culture has become lately. The stereotypical nerdy looks are still not wanted or accepted, despite other nerdy qualities possibly being so. One can be intelligent and wear glasses, but they still need to look handsome or beautiful in the eyes of the majority.

The male on the left in the *Pop culture vs. reality* meme can also be seen as a fake nerd, someone trying to be something he is not, which connects the meme to the fake/wannabe theme. In this case the ridicule is coming from inside nerd culture. When popular culture started to make nerd culture trendier, it created the good-looking nerd type. “Real” nerds still relate to the male on the right, and find the

image on the left to be an unrealistic creation of popular culture, portraying the qualities contemporary Western societies value. Therefore the humor in this meme can be interpreted as self-mockery, where nerds themselves are making fun of the stereotypical looks, targeting the new trends and the ways society would prefer them to look like. This type of humor critiques the stereotypes by highlighting them and making societal rules and demands look ridiculous.¹³⁰

However, in my interpretation this meme connects to non-nerds mocking nerds, and uses disciplinary humor as its strategy to create laughter, aiming to keep the old social order intact¹³¹. Nerds, no matter how much they might be thriving in popular culture, are still the skinny and undesirable men who have not been able to climb up the social ladder. In this meme ridiculing the looks of the male on the right shows the social order and tries to maintain it. There are several memes in this category than can be interpreted the same way, using either disciplinary humor or self-mockery as a strategy to create laughter. Again, it depends on the receiver and what elements they focus the most on when constructing their interpretation.

To continue this analysis it is necessary to try to define the term “masculinity”. R.W. Connell argues that masculinity as a concept exists especially in Western societies, where masculinity and femininity are compared¹³². The term itself is not easy to define, as it is very culturally dependent. The definition also differs between different fields and methods of research. Connell tries to specify masculinity as follows:

‘Masculinity’, to the extent the term can briefly be defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.¹³³

Masculinity refers to several aspects at the same time. It is not only about biological gender, but more of a behavioral and cultural matter. In addition, so-called “hegemonic masculinity” is a concept that is important in understanding some of the memes in this study. This term was also compiled and defined by Connell. It

¹³⁰ Weaver, “The ‘Other’ Laughs Back,” 32–36.

¹³¹ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 200–202.

¹³² R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005 [1995]), 68.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 71.

explains how males are depicted to have the highest social power in Western societies, making women inferior:

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.¹³⁴

Connell also explains the term as “culturally idealized form of masculine character”¹³⁵. This means that a certain fixed type does not exist everywhere. Hegemonic masculinities vary based on temporal and spatial contexts¹³⁶, thus referring to the “current ideal”¹³⁷ of what a man should be. Marianne Cooper argues that in the U.S. this could be defined as “a rich, good-looking, popular, athletic, white, heterosexual man”¹³⁸. This definition is visible in the *Pop culture vs. reality* meme discussed above, and also in several other memes in my data. Cooper’s list shows how a “real” man is depicted in the American cultural context, insinuating that everyone not like it is seen as non-masculine. *Pop culture vs. reality* depicts this “real” man who is good-looking, athletic, and most likely successful, and compares it to the stereotypical representation of a nerd – the opposite of what the society values. As Cliff Cheng highlights, one important action linked to hegemonic masculinity is aggressiveness. This aggression, in different forms, is usually directed at groups that are depicted somehow feminine – for instance nerds.¹³⁹ The joke in *Pop culture vs. reality* meme lies in – aggressively – mocking nerds for not looking masculine enough; not being “real” men in the way the American cultural context expects men to be. By highlighting physical differences the real nerd is made to look unwanted. The nerd is lesser, a failure in the eyes of the majority, and thus the target of ridicule.

However, due to changes in the work force, the idea of masculinity has been altered, especially when it comes to technology. In fact, Cooper discusses a new kind of masculinity relating especially to men working in Silicon Valley: nerds working with technical jobs. Having technology related skills and intelligence are presently linked

¹³⁴ Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

¹³⁵ R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 69.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³⁷ Cliff Cheng, “Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999): 297.

¹³⁸ Cooper, “Being the “Go-To Guy”,” 381.

¹³⁹ Cheng, “Marginalized Masculinities,” 298.

to masculinity.¹⁴⁰ Using machines has always been connected to men and their jobs¹⁴¹, and with our digitally focused contemporary society it is understandable that this machine aspect now relates to computers. However, the idea that computers and science related matters are not traditionally “manly”, because they do not require physical labor, still seems to exist¹⁴². Regardless, Cooper argues that in the context of Silicon Valley “a newly constituted masculinity” has been created, according to which the way you look is not as important as your intelligence and talents related to technology¹⁴³. I will revisit this topic in chapter 5.1 when I analyze the memes that address the superior intelligence nerds claim to have.

In addition, Lori Kendall argues that questions about nerds’ gender and especially masculinity are difficult to answer due to their twofold definitions:

The nerd stereotype includes aspects of both hypermasculinity (intellect, rejection of sartorial display, lack of ‘feminine’ social and relational skills) and feminization (lack of sports ability, small body size, lack of sexual relationships with women).¹⁴⁴

Nerds can be seen as masculine because of e.g. their intelligence, but also non-masculine, hence “feminine”, due to their body builds and misfortune with women. Both of these are visible in my data. In contemporary societies intelligence means success, therefore making nerds masculine¹⁴⁵, but at the same time nerds are still physically not “manly” enough. Connell lists nerds as “subordinate masculinity”; they are not accepted as real men. Nerds are “marginalized because their gender performance differs from hegemonic masculinity.”¹⁴⁶ Homosexual men are a part of this group as well, often being linked to being feminine¹⁴⁷. As nerds are put into the same “category” as homosexual men, there is a connection between nerds and femininity as well.

¹⁴⁰ Cooper, “Being the “Go-To Guy”,” 381.

¹⁴¹ Eglash, “Race, Sex, and Nerds,” 51.

¹⁴² Ibid., 51–52.

¹⁴³ Cooper, “Being the “Go-To Guy”,” 382.

¹⁴⁴ Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 264.

¹⁴⁵ Cooper, “Being the “Go-To Guy”,” 382.

¹⁴⁶ Cheng, “Marginalized Masculinities,” 304.

¹⁴⁷ Connell, *Masculinities*, 78–79.

According to Kendall, masculinity relates especially to the U.S.: “American culture still values rugged physicality and total autonomy”¹⁴⁸ as the key elements of masculinity. This seems to be relevant with the nerds in my data. Being nerdy might be accepted, but looking like one is not. The muscles and model-like face of the male in the left image in *Pop culture vs. reality* meme show that these physical qualities are still connected to masculinity, despite the fact that masculine jobs¹⁴⁹ are now not the ones requiring physical strength. Intelligence has gone past physical strength, but contemporary culture still seems to depict scrawny nerds as non-masculine. This also links to what Limor Shifman calls “failed masculinity”, a memetic feature she distinguished from user-generated content. By this she means how men in her data were not meeting the expectations contemporary society sets for them, and how this theme is very present in contemporary popular culture as well.¹⁵⁰ In the *Pop culture vs. reality* meme the nerd on the right image is an example of what the society could see as a failed masculinity, because the male is not seen as attractive or masculine. Contemporary Western societies value muscles as a sign of masculinity, and the nerd on the right does not show to have that quality. The picture does not show his body, but based on his facial structure and the stereotype claiming typical nerds are more feminine in their body type, I argue this claim is valid here as well.

The five elements – body type, accessories, whiteness, young age, and being a male – define how nerdy looks are presented in my data. An example of a meme that includes all of these qualities is *Wrong server, noob*. The meme consist of a photograph and two lines of text. The image shows a group of nerdy looking white males posing for the camera, in what looks like a school hallway. There are seven young men and one adult, possibly a teacher. The adult is standing in the middle and the younger males are situated around him, all smiling. Seven of the eight people in the image are wearing large glasses and a pocket protector, which are both accessories nerds are claimed to have. On the very left there is one young male wearing a t-shirt and sneakers. He looks to be in the wrong group based on his clothing, because the other young males are wearing collared shirts buttoned all the way up and tugged into their pants – creating an image of a nerd uniform. Three of

¹⁴⁸ Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 265.

¹⁴⁹ By this I mean the type of jobs that have been thought to only be suitable for men because of their requirements, and have therefore been mainly occupied by men.

¹⁵⁰ Shifman, *Memes*, 76–78.

them are also wearing pants that are slightly too short. The adult in the middle is wearing a polo shirt and looks overweight. The young males look somewhat childish with their bodies. All of the men in the picture look happy and proud of what ever occasion the picture links to. The text in the meme says: “You came to the wrong server, noob”. The word “server” refers to a computer, more specifically a program that hosts a certain network, which users can connect to. The definition of the word “noob” is a person who is new to especially computer or Internet related things¹⁵¹.

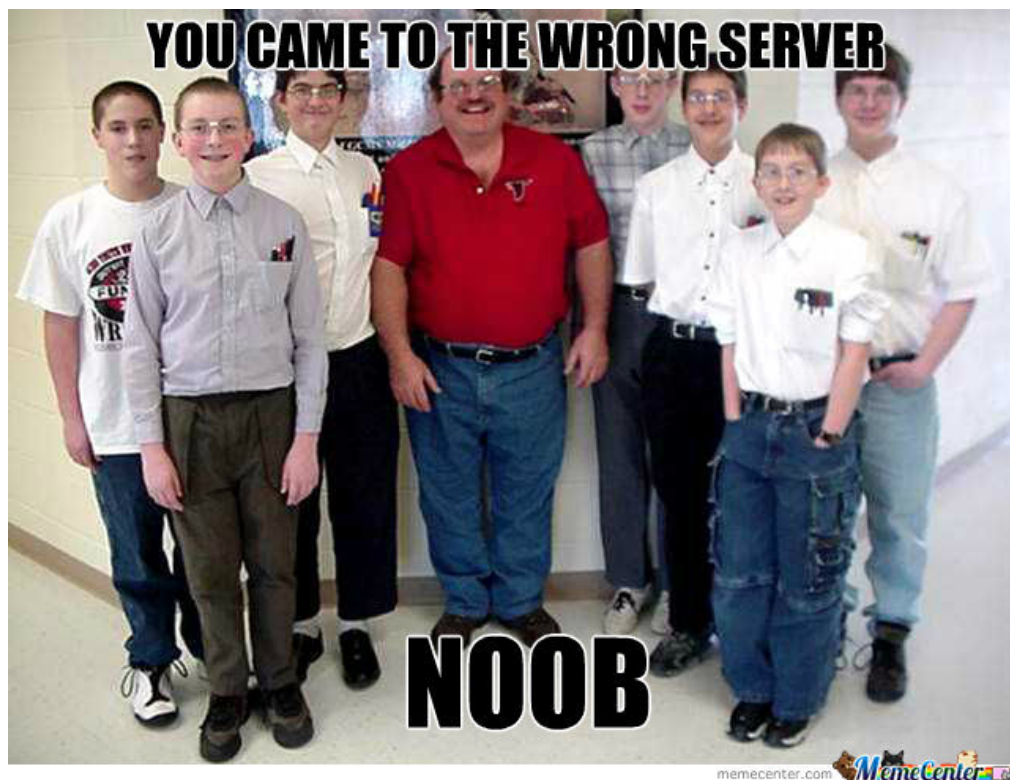


Image 4: Wrong server, noob.

The meme shows a group of stereotypical looking nerds as a street gang: someone walked into the wrong neighborhood and might face consequences. The neighborhood here is the server, and the person wandering is the noob who is not part of nerd culture. This nerdy gang does not look intimidating, whereas a real gang often would. This refers to how these nerds do not look masculine and strong, which could be considered as intimidating features. The meme ridicules nerds based on their looks, and the group in this picture for looking like a gang and wanting to be cool.

¹⁵¹ “Noob,” *Oxford American English Dictionary*,
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/noob> (accessed March 6, 2017).

The group looks like an extracurricular club in a school. This means they share a similar interest, which based on their looks is most likely something science or computer related. The meme laughs at these nerds, strengthening the stereotypes of what a nerd looks like, and how they are wrong thinking they could be seen impressive or accepted. Laughing at others raises the joker's own self-value, which is why jokes can be ways of social oppression¹⁵². Keeping the stereotypes alive by ridiculing nerds based on their looks is a form of disciplinary humor. The meme aims to remind nerds of their rightful place in the social hierarchy, and that no matter how they try to change it by acting like they have a higher status, they are still seen as inferior. According to a study by Katie Duchscherrer and John Dovidio, Internet and its quality of anonymity has a tendency of keeping stereotypes alive – especially when it comes to humor that ridicules other social groups. This kind of behavior is seen acceptable in the online world, yet not in real world and everyday communication.¹⁵³ Ridiculing nerds in this meme is an example of this type of derogatory behavior. Memes mocking nerds for their looks are aiming to amuse other Internet users by being mean¹⁵⁴.

One answer to why nerds are still being ridiculed and bullied – despite digital culture becoming more common and more positive nerd representations being visible – could be that nerds are now seen as a threat to social order. Nerds have been gaining appreciation and understanding, which is shaking the established positions of power. Nerds used to be on the bottom of the social order, but are now higher up in places where they were not before. When something is out of place, people often feel scared or threatened. I argue that this is why non-nerds are still ridiculing nerds. To back up my argument, I am referring to anthropologist Mary Douglas and her thoughts on what is perceived as “clean” and what is perceived as “polluted”. She mainly discusses primitive cultures and religion, but I argue that the same ideas can be linked to contemporary topics too. Douglas explains in her – already a classic – book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* how different

¹⁵² Critchley, *On Humour*, 12.

¹⁵³ Katie M. Duchscherrer and John F. Dovidio, “When Memes Are Mean: Appraisals of and Objections to Stereotypic Memes,” *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 2, no. 3 (2016): 336.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

cultures see cleanliness and pollution in different ways, and how “dirt” in the wrong place is a bad thing but accepted in the right place. The context of this pollution explains its meaning. Dirt is therefore just something that is out of place.¹⁵⁵

I refer to Douglas’s ideas on a symbolic level, associating nerds being the dirt that is threatening the social hierarchies. She in fact argues how “some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order”¹⁵⁶. For the existing order to survive, things cannot be in wrong places. Douglas states that “pollution is a type of danger” that can only exist where there are clear rules of order. If someone challenges these rules, by being in places where they should not be, they can cause disruptions in established order.¹⁵⁷ To clarify this in relation to my topic: nerds have gained more visibility in the mainstream culture and been able to climb up in the social hierarchy, which has led non-nerds feeling threatened because their world is not the same anymore. Douglas mentions that “social pollution” is indeed often contesting different kinds of existing boundaries¹⁵⁸.

As can be seen in these examples, nerds are still perceived through the old representation. Nerdy looks are linked to certain body type and ways of dressing, no matter how popular culture has changed the image of a nerd. By keeping these stereotypes alive, it is possible to keep the social order as it is. Nerdy looks are linked to being a lesser man, a feminine type that the society does not see as desired. Ridiculing nerds with the help of disciplinary humor seems to be keeping old ideas and interpretations alive, despite the changes in contemporary digital culture. Using these old stereotypes as laughing matters non-nerds are trying to ensure nerd culture and its members will not change their statuses in the eyes of the majority, despite all their efforts.

¹⁵⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1994 [1966]), 40–41.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41, 114. Quote on page 114.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 123–124.

4.2 Nerdy Interests

According to the memes, nerds' interests are bizarre and embarrassing. These interests are usually associated with technology, science related subjects, gaming, sci-fi, comic books, music, role-playing, and comic conventions. Nerds are often depicted to be intensely passionate about their interests, defending them and proudly liking them, despite the ridicule. This intensity is the element contemporary nerds are mocked for. In addition, memes about nerdy interests present stereotypically looking nerds, which enhances the ridiculing effect. Disciplinary humor is again used to ridicule nerds for not fitting into the mold set by the mainstream. Laughing at nerdy interests and to the intensity of them is another way to keep social order intact. Disciplinary laughter can aim to teach nerds what is seen as the right or wrong way to act, or what are the things in which to be interested.¹⁵⁹

Music nerd is the first example to discuss interests and intensity. The meme is picture of a slightly overweight, nerdy looking white male with glasses. He is typing on an old typewriter, looking provoked and angry, having his glasses lower down on his nose. There are three lines of text in this meme, saying "Don't call it metal, it's technical progressive post-metalcore". The man in the meme is annoyed because someone called his niche music interest by the wrong name. The typewriter refers to nerds often writing furious comments on the Internet, defending their interests or themselves against bullies. The fact that the machine is a typewriter and not a computer can also refer to contemporary "hipsters"¹⁶⁰. Hipsters are sometimes claimed to be easily angered if someone uses wrong terminology when referring to their interests as well, and they are assumed to use retro machines the majority does not, e.g. typewriters. Sherry Turkle talks about music as a passion for hackers at MIT in the 1980s. Some of these hackers were especially into classical music, but not for the music as something for the senses: they were passionate about the structural aspects of music, the calculable side of it.¹⁶¹ Music, therefore, is a recognized interest of nerds. *Music nerd* meme is thus a good example of not all nerds being just technology enthusiasts or coders.

¹⁵⁹ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 202, 205–207.

¹⁶⁰ The term "hipster" refers to individuals who are religiously following the latest trends, especially the ones that majority of people do not like. See *Oxford American English Dictionary*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/hipster> (accessed April 27, 2017).

¹⁶¹ Turkle, *The Second Self*, 201–203.



Image 5: Music nerd.

The element that makes someone a nerd in contemporary worlds because of their interests is the *intensity* of it. Being interested in something with a high intensity is not depicted as a good thing; being over-interested in something is not normal. This is a part of the new nerd stereotype, and the main argument for memes in this category. Music as an interest is visible in other memes as well, not being trendy or a good hobby. Focusing on e.g. learning to play piano is depicted nerdy according to the data, possibly because piano music is often linked to classical music, which is not popular among the mainstream. Interestingly, a study by David Kinney, about how young people labeled as nerds in middle school were able to shake off the label while in high school, states how music, as an extracurricular activity, was one of the things helping these students to feel more popular and accepted among their classmates¹⁶². Hobbies like such can help to meet likeminded people and thus find a community where one feels confident. This is, however, contradicting with the way the nerd

¹⁶² David A. Kinney, "From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School," *Sociology of Education* 66 (1993): 30.

memes present e.g. musical interests: they are not deemed accepted. The feelings of popularity might therefore be linked to finding people who enjoy similar things, which then helps in feeling adequate among other people.

Another example showing how nerdy interests are ridiculed is a meme I titled *Not just computing*. It includes an image of a stereotypical nerdy male: he wears glasses, is young and white, and has a slim figure. The male is looking into the camera, with a serious face. The picture is added on top of a black background and has five lines of text under it. The text says: “Im [sic] not the type, that is just sitting infront [sic] of the computer all day..often I go to woods, dress [sic] as an orc to play with my friends”.¹⁶³ The meme is making fun of nerds for their interests, but also comparing this nerdy male to someone who would go out in the nature to e.g. hike or camp. Nerds’ way of going into the wild is not the average: they do not go to enjoy nature itself but take their niche with them. This again links to nerds not being masculine enough, as being able to survive in the woods can be seen as a quality of “real”, masculine men.

¹⁶³ The text lines contain several grammatical errors, and can either mean the creator of the meme has not mastered grammar rules or is not a native English speaker. I interpret that the meme was made by a non-nerd trying to ridicule nerds, but making grammar mistakes shows the person is not very intelligent. The roles can therefore be turned around, and nerds can laugh at the person who could not write correct sentences. Nerds are often depicted using “superstandard” English: To be very precise with their grammar and wordings. They do not use spoken language and do not make mistakes like the ones in the meme here. For more, see e.g. Bucholtz, “Whiteness of Nerds,” 84–88.

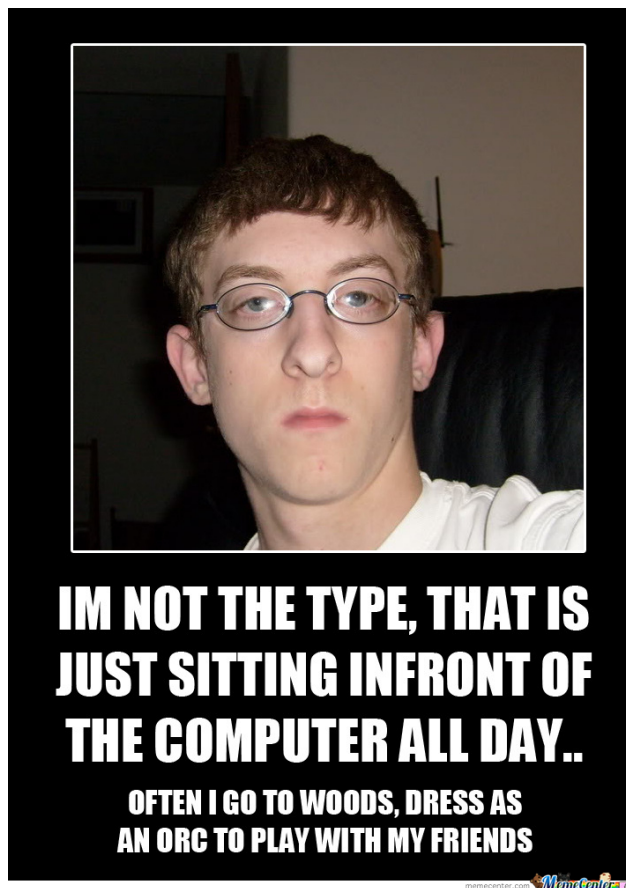


Image 6: Not just computing.

This meme mostly ridicules nerds for their interests in computers and how they can spend hours in front of them. It also laughs at so-called “live action role-playing”, or LARPing. Neither of these is depicted as a suitable way to spend time in the eyes of non-nerds. The word “orc” on line five refers to villainous and maleficent characters in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* fantasy books, which are known to be part of the niche nerds enjoy¹⁶⁴. LARPing is visible in several other memes tagged under this category as well, always depicted as an embarrassing hobby. For instance meme *Unmanly LARPing*¹⁶⁵ links this nerdy interest for not being an accepted hobby for males, because of the fact that one needs to dress up in costumes and act. This specific meme shows a role-playing male carrying a pink shield with a girly pattern, highlighting the feminine interpretations of LARPing. The text in the meme states it is showing a “fine specimen of manliness”, and mocks the nerd for not having masculine hobbies. Dressing up in costumes does not fit the qualities contemporary

¹⁶⁴ However, the films based on the book series made in the early 2000s brought this fantasy world into mainstream and ended up being highly successful – and not only among nerds.

¹⁶⁵ See Appendix 1.

societies have set for men, and acting out scenes from e.g. a fantasy book does not do that either.¹⁶⁶

The meme *Not just computing* implies that the male is trying to be cool saying he is not just sitting inside, yet the majority sees him as ridiculous. Role-playing in the woods is not what most people do, making it bizarre and thus embarrassing. Matters as such are separating nerds from the rest of the society and what is seen as acceptable behavior, therefore being the reason for ridiculing. Laughing at someone who breaks social norms has been common for centuries, and is seen as a tolerable thing to do because of that¹⁶⁷. An interest in computers seems to still be nerdy, despite most people in contemporary societies spending hours each day on their computers or tablets. This shows how closely technology and computers are linked to nerd culture. I argue that a nerdy interest in computers also refers to what is done with it. In some memes of this category nerds are seen as enthusiastic gamers or programmers who have next level knowledge of these machines compared to non-nerds. As basic skills with computers are a necessity today, a person who knows more than the average user or spends their free time playing online video games is labeled a nerd, a loser. The old stereotypes about nerds being passionate about computers are still existent, but they have been brought to this decade by altering the stereotype a little. Computers and gaming are visible also in the Butthurt Dweller type memes mentioned before. In those memes the nerdy character is being ignorant of real life, and treats it like a game. Memes about these topics state e.g. how the nerd does not have birthdays because he only “levels up”¹⁶⁸, like one would in a game when succeeding and preceding in it.

Thomas Ford and Mark Ferguson studied social consequences of disparagement, or ridiculing, humor. They argue based on existing research, that:

exposure to disparagement is not likely to create or reinforce negative stereotypes or prejudiced attitudes. Exposure to disparagement humor does, however, have a negative social consequence: It increases tolerance of discriminatory events for people high in prejudice toward the disparaged group.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Shifman, *Memes*, 76–77.

¹⁶⁷ Critchley, *On Humour*, 12.

¹⁶⁸ See Image 1.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas E. Ford and Mark A Ferguson, “Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8 no. 1 (2004): 79.

According to their article, people usually interpret ridiculing humor in “a nonserious, humor mindset”¹⁷⁰ if there are no signs showing that doing so would not be accepted¹⁷¹. However, based on my data, using disparaging jokes about nerds appears to keep the old stereotypes alive, especially when it comes to how nerds look like and what they are interested in. I argue that memes that ridicule nerds because of certain features *do* maintain these stereotypical and mostly negative representations. They create a space where humor like this is seen as accepted, resulting in no one wanting to stop it. Additionally, it seems that non-nerds do not depict this ridiculing humor as a bad thing, but instead see it as light joking. This seemingly harmless joking can, however, help keeping the old negative stereotypes alive. Nevertheless, nerds and their late popularity in popular culture have been able to start turning this tendency around, mostly through self-ridicule. It seems that the context and target of disparaging or ridiculing humor plays an important role when deciding if it is doing harm or not.

Being a nerd might be more accepted than it used to be, but it still does not mean that the old stereotypes have disappeared. Kendall states in her article from 1999 that negative stereotypes about nerds tell us that people are still uncomfortable with computers and do not know how to really use them, which then reflects to how they perceive the ones being fluent with such technology¹⁷². This statement might be almost 20 years old, but it feels not much has changed. Programming, for instance, is still seen as mysterious and nerdy, yet the concept is not as bizarre as it used to be, and even elementary schools have taken coding into their curricula. Computers are part of everyday life and used almost everywhere, but not everyone understands them. Younger generations have grown to be more technology-minded because they have always been surrounded with high speed Internet and newest gadgets, whereas older generations still see most technology as impossible to understand.

In current world it is understood that one does not have to be a nerd to be able to use a computer. Nevertheless, the term nerd still has negative connotations and

¹⁷⁰ Ford and Ferguson, “Social Consequences,” 81.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 81–82.

¹⁷² Kendall, “Nerd Nations,” 280.

meanings, and is strongly connected to someone using a computer. When computers became more common, nerdism started to become more positive, but the negative side of it still remained¹⁷³. Contemporary nerds are not mocked for their interests, but based on the intensity of these interests. This passion tends to make nerds look like societal outcasts, only spending time with their interests and ignoring the real world. This connects to social relationships – the third category under the Loser group –, which I will examine next.

4.3 Lack of Relationships

Not having relationships is seen as a nerdy characteristic. It is a somewhat common theme inside the Loser group, having 59 memes tagged under it. Memes presenting the lack of relationships category depict nerds to not have social skills, especially with the opposite sex. As nerds in my data are mostly represented as male, they are not successful with women – nerdy or not. These relationships can also relate to all kinds of social activities, or “having a life”. Non-nerds and societal norms emphasize that to be successful and normal you need to have a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Based on the representation presented in memes of this category nerds have neither because of how they look, act, and what they like. According to Stuart Hall stereotypes are used to enforce the established limits of social life, preserve the power structures, and to preclude the deviant ones, the “Others”, from social life¹⁷⁴.

Using the stereotype that nerds cannot succeed in romantic relationships is showing that nerds are not part of the accepted society. As mentioned earlier, Limor Shifman talks about “the so-called crisis of masculinity”, meaning how men have failed to attain the elementary tasks and roles males are supposed to have in their lives. In her study this faulty masculinity was seen funny, making the whole idea ambivalent.¹⁷⁵ This theme is visible in my data as well. Nerds are not fitting in with how the society sees males, and definitely do not meet the roles expected of them – especially when it comes to relationships.

¹⁷³ Kendall, “Nerd Nations,” 275, 280.

¹⁷⁴ Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” 248.

¹⁷⁵ Shifman, *Memes*, 77–78.

Male nerds are shown to be failing with women or being something women do not want. Often nerds in these memes would want a girlfriend, but are unable to find one. Sometimes nerds are presented to not even be interested in the opposite sex, because they are more interested in their computers and hobbies. Nerds are shown to prefer virtual life to real life. An interesting contradiction is created when male nerds claim they would want a girlfriend, preferably a nerdy one, but as I will discuss in chapter 6 male nerds do not believe nerd girls exist at all. It thus looks like nerds are themselves creating a problem with possible relationships.

A very common argument in memes of this category is how male nerds are virgins, and will forever be. Several memes refer to especially role-playing and gaming to be factors that keep nerds' virginity intact. Most memes like this are using ridicule in the form of disciplinary humor, yet there are a few where nerds make fun of themselves for being virgins and not being able to lose the label. The meme titled *Virginity protected* is one example of memes using the disciplinary humor strategy. It is a picture of five white men inside a room with a programming related presentation projected on a screen behind them. All men look like stereotypical nerds. Three of them have glasses, and three rather long and untamed hairdos. They do not seem to be athletic or overweight, but instead somewhat feminine in their body types. Some of these men look older than teenagers. All five are dressed up as knights or other medieval characters, holding swords, axes, or shields. They look like a group of role-playing men. There are two lines of the text on the image, saying: "Back off bitches, this virginity is ours".



Image 7: Virginity protected

This meme states that nerdy interests and looks are the reason why a nerd would not have a sexual/romantic relationship. The person making the meme could of course not know if these individuals actually have relationships, but the fact that they are pictured as nerds is enough to justify the claim. The men in this meme resemble a brotherhood or similar, protecting their virginity with swords and axes. *Virginity protected* implies that it is indeed the men who are preventing themselves from losing their virginity: the ways in which they present themselves. Displaying an exaggerated representation of a nerd with his hobbies, and highlighting that this passion is the reason why he will not have a relationship, is what creates humor here. The meme presents these nerds in an aggressive way, which creates the amusement of them strongly protecting their virgin statuses, not wanting to lose it. Charlie Gere mentions how the first generation of hackers, the MIT students, created the now well-known representation of “the intellectually advanced but socially and sexually awkward male[s]”¹⁷⁶. Nerds being unsuccessful with the opposite sex is thus a widely acknowledged fact, which still does not mean it is necessarily true. In any case, this statement connected to male nerds appears to be alive and used when ridiculing nerds. Using the word “bitches” in relation to women is a way to show that nerds are not even interested in women and do not respect them. There is no room

¹⁷⁶ Gere, *Digital Culture*, 136.

for women in the lives of role playing nerds. Referring to women as “bitches” can also mean nerds find women threatening and are calling them names because of that. I will discuss this argument more in chapter 6.1.

Some memes of this category discuss how nerds would want a relationship and everything that comes with it, but still end up being alone because of the choices they make. Memes like this are often using self-mockery. One example is a meme I titled *Forever single*¹⁷⁷. In this meme a nerd laughs at himself because he does not want to leave home and chooses a video game over real relationships. In addition, this meme is a good example of the kind of literacy memes sometimes require, as it is hard to understand the meaning of it without knowing about this specific meme genre and its elements. It also shows the difficulty with interpreting Internet memes, because there are several factors that can guide the receiver’s interpretation in different directions.

Forever single consists of seven frames, showing a drawn head of a male, a nerd, in a comic strip. In the first frame he tells how he has been playing a video game and has reached the maximum with it. In the second frame he starts questioning his life choices. He contemplates on how he is just playing games and how he basically is stuck in life, also mentioning not having many friends and never having a girlfriend in the third frame. In the fourth frame this leads to him thinking that he actually would want a relationship, marriage, and children. The fifth frame shows how the nerd then decides to go out to find new friends and eventually love. The next frame shows that 15 minutes passes, and in the last frame the nerd is pictured to be back at playing, stating that he does not care after all and will just get married inside the game. The last face is crying and smiling at the same time. The effort of going out to meet people and be part of real life ends up requiring too much effort, so the nerd decides to stay home and keep playing. This meme shows that nerds also want the things majority of the society does. Here the nerd ends up making fun of himself for being such a socially challenged and lazy nerd, arguing that virtual reality is an easier place to connect with people than real life.

¹⁷⁷ The name refers to so-called “Rage Comics” and common characters in them, which is a meme type I will discuss a bit later in this chapter.



Image 8: Forever single

Ryan Milner claims that there are certain dominant discourses used in memes talking about social life. A common meme genre using this thematic is often referred to as "Rage Comics", which are sometimes used to criticize certain aspects of life¹⁷⁸. *Forever single* belongs to this Rage Comic meme genre. Milner divides these comics into three types, two of which are visible in the meme analyzed here. According to

¹⁷⁸ Ryan Milner, "The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2012), 143, 100.

him, a great number of memes talking about failure in social life show how nerdy men are not successful with women. Milner refers to these as “Fail” memes: someone failed in social life themselves.¹⁷⁹ These memes show “misfortune” or “incompetence” of the creator of the meme. Rage Comics tend to include certain type of drawn characters: stick figures with so-called “Rage Faces”¹⁸⁰. Thus, to understand a Rage Comic one needs to be literate with the meme genre and its elements. Like the name states, these memes are in a comic strip form, telling a short story. In the case of the example meme, the third frame has a “disappointed okay” face and the fourth a “frown”, both of which Milner categorizes under his Fail type memes. The fifth frame shows a “tearful smile” that is common in “Win” memes, which Milner explains to be a type that shows small successes in social life.¹⁸¹ The frame showing that time passes is from the cartoon *Spongebob Squarepants* and is a common way to show time passing in Rage Comics¹⁸². The last frame combines two known Rage Faces: a lonely “forever alone” face used in Fail memes, and “confident ‘Bitch Please’ smile” used in Win memes¹⁸³. The merging of the two shows that the nerd is sad for not having relationships, but at the same time does not actually care about the fact.

The fact that the crying and lonely face is used, indicates that the nerd does not want to be alone, but the actions required to find love would be too much for him. This is why he decides that playing his game is sufficient for him – especially because he can find another player and “marry” them in the virtual world. The nerd in the meme is a loser, failing in relationships, but in addition decides to not care about societal norms. The joke in this meme lies in the way the nerd is making fun of his own loneliness and failures. This kind of reverse humor shows dissatisfaction towards societal norms and what is expected of individuals, through self-mockery. But as Simon Weaver points out, humor like this is not always successful with what it tries to accomplish.¹⁸⁴ *Forever single* might come through as just showing a nerd failing in romantic relationships – without the intended self-irony – and therefore reinforce the stereotype that nerds prefer technology to people.

¹⁷⁹ Milner, “The World Made Meme,” 146–147.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 100–103, 143.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 143–144.

¹⁸² Ibid., 125–126.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 144, 160.

¹⁸⁴ Weaver, “The ‘Other’ Laughs Back,” 32–33, 44.

Several of the Butthurt Dweller type memes discuss unsuccessful relationships as well. Usually the male nerd is mocked for not having a girlfriend. He is for instance asking what a girlfriend is, saying he has not heard about a *Pokémon*¹⁸⁵ or a server with that name. Statements like these suggest that video games or computers are the reasons a nerd does not have any relationships, showing how ignorant the nerd character is when it comes to the topic. These memes indicate that male nerds do not have any experience when it comes to girlfriends – they do not even know what the word means. The Butthurt character can also state how he does actually have a life, because he has several lives in a certain game – mixing together real life and having multiple possibilities to continue in a game after dying. These memes show the ignorant arrogance nerds are depicted to have. They think they know everything and are successful, yet in reality they do not know about the real world and the norms of their societies. There are also other possible interpretations: nerds either prefer the virtual world to real world, or cannot truly separate the two. The virtual world might feel better, because in there nerds are among their own or are in other ways succeeding, whereas in real life they are depicted as losers.

This argument is rather visible in the memes of this category. Some suggest that nerds will not have sexual relationships with people – only machines – or that nerds prefer machines to people. A meme titled *Calculator lover* is an example of this. This meme is divided into two frames. The first one shows a calculator screen with (.) (.) symbols, which are meant to represent women's breasts. There is a word "fap" written twice in this frame, referring to the sound that is produced when a male is masturbating¹⁸⁶. The other image is below the first one, showing the calculator with the breast symbols on the right side and a drawn representation of a nerd on the left, biting his lip while assumedly masturbating, surrounded by the word "fap". This meme presents how nerds can pleasure themselves with just mathematical symbols that resemble breasts. They do not need real women because they have technology. The nerdy face in the meme is that of Butthurt Dweller's and refers to nerds being losers based on their looks – here causing the lack of human relationships.

¹⁸⁵ A video game franchise, which I will discuss more in chapter 5.2.

¹⁸⁶ The word is commonly understood and used among Internet users.



Image 9: Calculator lover.

However, distinguished from the Loser group, here Butthurt's face is drawn and can mean that the meme is intended as self-irony. He is masturbating to a calculator and is not even ashamed of it. This meme can be interpreted in two opposite ways, yet here I categorize it to the Loser group because the connection to lack of relationships category is so strong. Some memes talking about masturbation being the only sexual occurrence nerds will have do not show technology as the means. They can e.g. picture the hand of a nerd to be his significant other, and used for the act. The main argument in these memes is that nerds cannot get real partners because of who they are, which is what creates laughter. It is good to notice that memes discussing sexual relations or masturbating only picture male nerds.

This chapter presented the three categories inside the Loser group. Nerdy looks, interests, and failures in relationships offer non-nerds tools for ridiculing nerds. The visual representation of a nerd is very clear and is present in over a half of the entire data. According to these memes, being overweight or feminine in body type, white, young, male, and dressing in certain ways, are clear indicators of someone's nerdiness. The second category (interests) showed that being interested in something – even technology – does not make someone a nerd in the contemporary world, but the high intensity of said interests does. The third category that is used to make nerds losers presented failure in especially romantic relationships. Stereotypical looks and intense interests prevent nerds from having these relationships, which Western societies see as the building blocks for a normal life. Elements of the categories discussed here were used for mocking nerds in the past as well – they are not only contemporary themes. Yet, due to changes in our societies – especially relating technology – the role of looks, interests, and social failure as ammunition for ridicule has changed and grown.

As mentioned earlier, there are multiple ways to interpret and understand these types of memes. Most of them can belong to both the Loser and Superior groups, simply based on the elements and arguments they consists of, and how the receiver understands the humor in them. This note leads us to the next analysis chapter, where nerds are the ones being superior.

5. Nerd as a Superior

In this chapter I will discuss and analyze memes that use the Superior argument when creating laughter. Memes of the Superior group are divided into four different categories: arrogant, intelligence, proud, and successful relationships. I will first introduce how nerds show superiority because of their intelligence, and then discuss how some memes present nerds being proud of who they are, thus empowering themselves against non-nerds. The last subchapter combines arrogant memes and success in relationships, as those overlap in a large amount of the memes. The reason for them succeeding in relationships is due to e.g. certain skills, which are often discussed in an arrogant way. This is why I chose to discuss these two categories together.

It needs to be noted that memes in the Superior group also use categories from the Loser group, especially when it comes to interests or looks. This shows that nerds are proud of who they are and what they are interested in. Nerds have managed to turn the previous bullying around by abusing the fact that humor can often be self-ridicule¹⁸⁷, which is one humor strategy used in the memes. By turning ridicule into humor and self-irony, it is possible to avoid being humiliated. When nerds make fun of themselves they can disarm the bullies from power, and instead empower themselves and/or the nerd community. Another humor strategy used in memes of the Superior group is rebellious humor. This type of humor might not be able to completely suppress power, but it can be used to either reinforce or weaken it¹⁸⁸.

Simon Weaver points out the “polysemic potential” of reverse humor, mentioning it being able to lead “to the simultaneous existence of the earlier and reversed meaning from a single utterance”¹⁸⁹. Nerds using reverse humor, self-mockery, in these memes is simultaneously reinforcing and challenging the established stereotypes. Weaver recommends to not focus too much on the assumed intentions of the joker, but instead acknowledging the opposite possibilities the joke can have¹⁹⁰.

¹⁸⁷ Critchley, *On Humour*, 94.

¹⁸⁸ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 213.

¹⁸⁹ Weaver, “The ‘Other’ Laughs Back,” 32.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

5.1 Intelligence

Nerds are depicted more intelligent than other people in memes of this category, which makes them superior. Some of these memes use self-mockery, which shows nerds are able to laugh at the thought of them being intelligently superior. This superior intelligence is sometimes shown in math or science related memes, e.g. including an equation not everyone can understand. For instance, two memes show clocks that have equations or formulas instead of the hour numbers. If you are not mathematically talented it is hard to understand what is said. The numbers on a clock face are familiar without counting, of course, but being able to use those equations shows intelligence. Nerds are able to communicate with each other via such memes, showing non-nerds how ignorant they are for not understanding. Memes of this category also use rebellious humor to contest against social norms that state that certain kind of intelligence is not accepted or desired. Nerds are able to create their own, closed communities, which the majority does not understand. They use intelligence to separate them from the rest of society: they are better than the rest and want to highlight it.¹⁹¹

Most memes of the intelligence category show the separation of nerds and non-nerds with ironic humor. For instance, meme I titled *Hackerman* shows a picture of a stereotypical male nerd with large glasses and long hair, standing inside an office space. He looks serious and tough, and is looking straight into the camera. The image seems to be from the 1980s based on how the male is dressed. Above the image is a text box saying: “When my family praises me for fixing the wi-fi and all I did was restart the router.” On the bottom of the picture is a text saying “Hackerman” in a bold, logotype font. According to Know Your Meme, the template and character are from a 2015 film called *Kung Fury*¹⁹², which explains the font.

¹⁹¹ There are also memes more harmless. For instance, laughter is created by showing a cat dressed in nerdy glasses and a tie, in front of a desk full of chemistry equipment. The meme is funny because it links nerdy elements and scientific intelligence to an animal. Not all memes in this category show superiority through rebellious or reversed humor, but instead try to make science or technology related intelligence a more positive – and lighter – matter.

¹⁹² “Hackerman,” *Know Your Meme*, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hackerman> (accessed March 17, 2017).



Image 10: Hackerman.

This meme uses self-mockery to show how a nerd is superior because of his intelligence. His family thought he was highly intelligent for making the wireless Internet connection work again, when all that was done was the restarting of the router. The nerd was not actually extraordinarily smart, but knew a bit more than the others. Acquiring the status of a technological superhero makes the nerd feel superior, like a hacker who is capable of doing anything computer related. According to my interpretation, the meme is using self-ridicule to show that nerds might not actually be highly intelligent, but are seen that way because they know more than the rest – and are willing to accept the glory from it. The joke in this meme lies in making non-nerds look stupid because they did not even try to restart the router, which is rather easy as it requires just a push of a button. However, irony as a type of humor is not the easiest to interpret or catch, which is why there is also an opposite way of interpreting this meme: the superiority here could be seen as mockery from non-nerds, showing that nerds think they are proper hackers for performing simple tasks, when in reality they are not as intelligent.

Hackerman meme highlights the stereotypical representation of a nerd: his looks and skills. These elements are used to create laughter. The self-mockery uses these stereotypes, but shows that they are rather exaggerated. As Weaver points out, reverse discourses are visibly targeted towards the previous discourses, showing resistance to them¹⁹³. Using reversed discourse this meme is able to point out the ambivalence and ridiculousness of the representation connected to nerds, and laugh at it. The connection to the old stereotype of a highly intelligent nerd is clear here, and the reversal of the discourse makes it into an element that lifts nerds up from being losers, and up to being superior. This shows resistance to the idea that technological intelligence is not good. In addition, through this meme nerds can laugh at themselves for sometimes trying to act like superior beings. The meme shows that life should not be taken too seriously, and that being able to do a bit more than the average computer user does not make you a god-like figure.

Not all memes of this category use the stereotypical looks as a source of laughter. As a visual example of such memes I present one I titled *Bored in class*. It is a picture of an adult man in a suit rolling his eyes and having his arms crossed, showing that he is bored or annoyed of the current situation. The man looks well-groomed and neat, differing from the usual nerd representation. There are three lines of text on the picture, saying: “Your face in a math lesson when you’re good in math, but your class isn’t.” The meme looks rather simple, yet has an intertextual reference to nerd culture. The man in the picture is an American actor Robert Downey Jr. who plays the superhero *Iron Man* in the film versions of Marvel Comics’ *The Avengers* comic books. These films, and the character played by Downey, are very popular among nerds – not forgetting the original comic books. Downey as an actor and individual is admired on the Internet¹⁹⁴ by the so-called “millennials”¹⁹⁵, linking the meme to Internet culture and younger audiences. A person not familiar with the films or the actor can miss this reference, showing they are not part of nerd culture or know about contemporary popular culture in large.

¹⁹³ Weaver, “The ‘Other’ Laughs Back,” 31–32.

¹⁹⁴ See e.g. Lauren Yapalater and Dave Stopera, “32 Reasons Why Robert Downey Jr. Is the Most Perfect Man in the Universe,” *Buzzfeed*, April 25, 2013, https://www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/reasons-robert-downey-jr-is-the-greatest-man-who-ever-liv?utm_term=.ua553vkAE#.ckYgwJ9L2 (accessed March 17, 2017).

¹⁹⁵ The term refers to a person who became a young adult in the early 2000s. See *Oxford American English Dictionary*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/millennial> (accessed April 20, 2017).

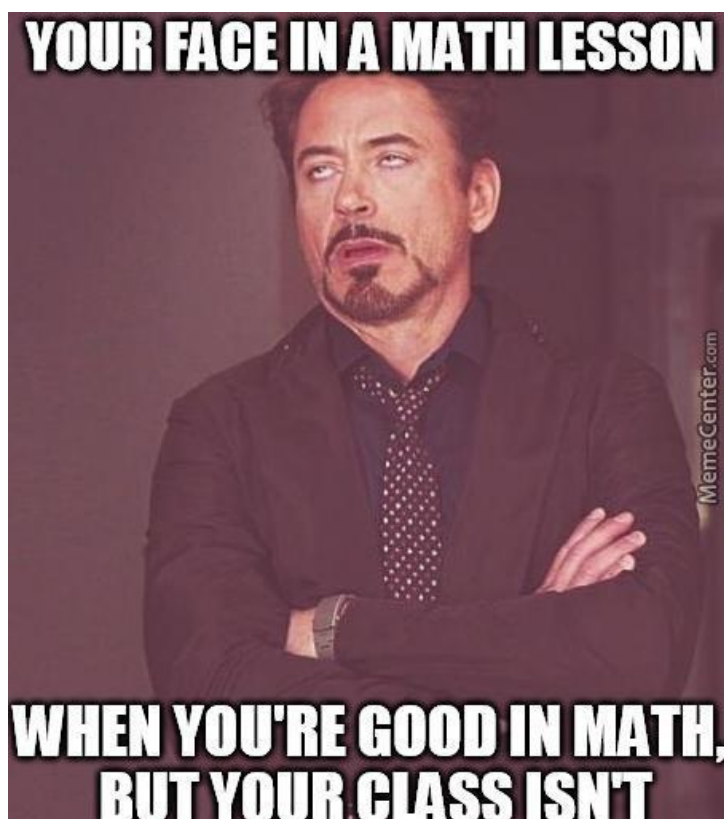


Image 11: Bored in class.

Bored in class shows superiority by stating that the “Original Poster” (OP)¹⁹⁶ is more intelligent than his or her classmates, who are having difficulties in mathematics. The OP feels bored or annoyed because he/she understands the discussed topics and is not receiving enough challenges from his/her education. Here the laughter comes from using a widely known and admired actor making a funny face, and stating that the OP is superior to their peers because normal school classes are easy. The humor is not similar to the previous example of this subchapter; it does not make fun of nerds themselves for being intelligent. Instead, the humor comes from ridiculing non-nerds. This meme uses rebellious humor: someone with a lower status wants to challenge social norms and hierarchies¹⁹⁷. In addition, *Bored in class* depicts nerds not as stereotypically undesired, but successful and popular by using Downey’s picture. This is showing that not everyone who is intelligent and nerdy matches the representation of a bullied nerd. Nerds’ intelligence raises them up to another level in

¹⁹⁶ A term used on the Internet, referring to the original creator and sharer of e.g. a meme. See *Oxford American English Dictionary*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/op> (accessed April 29, 2017).

¹⁹⁷ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 202–203.

the society – or at least that is the intent with the usage of rebellious humor. Being more intelligent than the rest of the society should mean a higher status, but this is often the other way around. By rebelling against these established ideas, nerds are showing that the hierarchies are not correct and should be changed.

According to Judy Wajcman, nerdy men who are obsessed with technology are actually making up for the fact that they do not have authority in the society. Skills with computers show nerds' intelligence and their superiority over people who do not have the same skills, therefore granting some level of power.¹⁹⁸ Lori Kendall also argues that during the 1980s and 1990s nerd identity started to gain more masculine connotations because technology became the means of making money, and having money gives a person more of a masculine status – especially in the U.S.¹⁹⁹ R.W. Connell quotes Andrew Tolston when claiming that wage is indeed an essential part of masculinity²⁰⁰. Money, thus, makes you a “real” man. Cliff Cheng points out that in contemporary capitalist societies the meaning of hegemonic masculinity has changed “from physical strength to wealth as a power source”²⁰¹ and gives Bill Gates, the CEO of Microsoft, as an example of these new powerful men. Two memes of the intelligence category mention Bill Gates as a sort of a nerd hero, who proved that you do not have to look traditionally masculine to become successful: making money will make you wanted, successful, and therefore masculine.

Kendall also argues how monetary success is a form of “revenge” of the nerds. The bullied outsiders were now using technology to be successful – the same element that they had been ridiculed for.²⁰² Marianne Cooper continues on this same claim discussing the technological center of Silicon Valley and how “men who in their youth were marginalized for being geeks and nerds came back as adults to get the last laugh”²⁰³ – their revenge – by establishing now billion dollar tech companies. Their intelligence provided them with money and power, and created a new kind of nerd masculinity²⁰⁴. Cooper discusses this as a masculinity valuing “technical skill

¹⁹⁸ Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 143–145.

¹⁹⁹ Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 261–262, 265–266.

²⁰⁰ Connell, *Masculinities*, 93.

²⁰¹ Cheng, “Marginalized Masculinities,” 303.

²⁰² Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 266.

²⁰³ Cooper, “Being the “Go-To Guy,”” 381–382.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 382.

and brilliance” more than “looks and athletic ability”²⁰⁵, the latter two often being traditionally masculine qualities²⁰⁶. Nerds have been able to show their superiority by becoming successful and wealthy. Memes discussing nerdy intelligence laugh at non-nerds for not having similar IQ’s and consequently not being able to succeed in the contemporary digital society. Technological skills are used to compensate for the nerdy looks and other undesired qualities that separate nerds from “real” men.

For some reason, a certain kind of intelligence has been an unwanted quality in the eyes of the mainstream. I argue that one reason behind this is ignorance and jealousy. Nerds who understand computers or mathematical equations have been a group to laugh at – maybe because the bullies were intimidated and/or envious by this intelligence and the new technology. Nerds are using this idea for their own benefit in the memes of this category. They are showing how their intelligence makes them superior, and non-nerds inferior. Nerds do not seem to be minding that they are still sometimes depicted alien because of their intelligence and abilities concerning it, and that other people do not really understand them, or technology, for that matter. Intelligence gives nerds something that keeps them separated from the majority of people, and strengthens the culture as a community. It needs to be noted, however, that because there are so many definitions for a nerd, intelligence does not link to everyone identifying him or herself into this subculture.

5.2 Proud of Being a Nerd

Memes in the proud category show that nerds are not afraid to be who they are and to like what they want, no matter what the society prefers. Being a nerd is a thing to be proud of. Memes of this category joke about being a nerd and having certain qualities. The humor creates a superior and dignified image of nerds, instead of looking like a failure. Kendall points out in her study about male nerds how humor is often used when stating that someone identifies as a nerd. Men in her study also showed that by joking about their nerdiness they are moving away from the identity hegemonic masculinity creates.²⁰⁷ As mentioned in the previous subchapter, nerds

²⁰⁵ Cooper, “Being the “Go-To Guy”,” 382.

²⁰⁶ Connell, *Masculinities*, 45–46.

²⁰⁷ Kendall, ““Oh No! I’m a Nerd!”,” 262.

have been creating their own masculinity through succeeding in work life. This success makes them proud of who they are.

Being proud of nerdy qualities is visible in different ways. One way is to show pride in liking nerdy things, and another is using certain words to highlight this superior pride, e.g. Master, Super nerd, or The One. An example of both of these is the meme *Pokémon master*. It is an image with red color on the top half and white on the lower, with a black line and a white circle in the middle. The image refers to a *Poké Ball* from a video game called *Pokémon*, which I will introduce in the next paragraph. The meme has three lines of text saying: “Don’t call me a “nerd”. The proper term is “Pokémon Master”.” The meme addresses an element linked to nerd culture and what nerds are interested in, declaring pride in it. The OP wants to be called a master in the game, showing he or she is not embarrassed of this interest. The humor is created by asking to be called a superior gamer. The OP is making fun of their own nerdiness. According to Thomas Hobbes’s humor theory, laughing at yourself is the same thing as laughing at others, especially when laughing at your previous and lesser self²⁰⁸. This meme shows that the nerd in question has evolved as a nerd, now being a master level gamer, and thus should be called with a new title.

²⁰⁸ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 52.

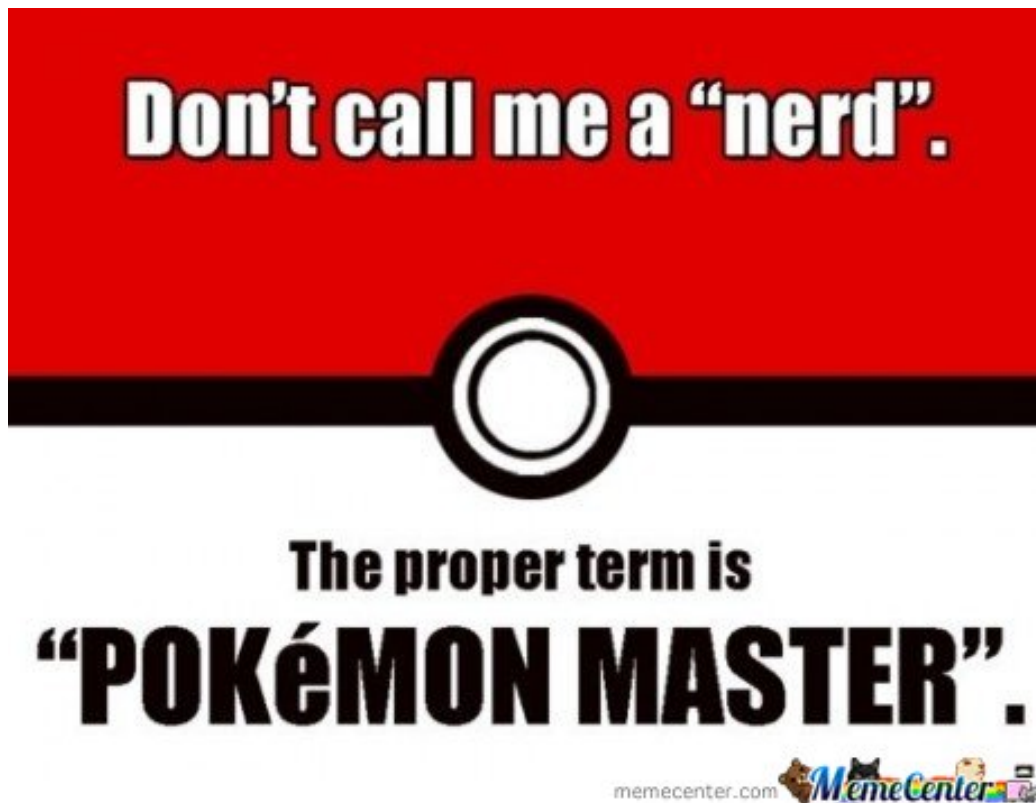


Image 12: Pokémon master.

Pokémon was a video game phenomenon in the late 1990s, originating from the Japanese game company *Nintendo* and becoming popular across the globe. It soon generated collectible cards and an animated television series. The game has fictional creatures that are captured and then put to fight against each other, bringing glory to their owners. The game became popular again in 2016 when it was re-launched as an interactive mobile game, where a player can walk around in their actual surroundings, finding and capturing these Pokémon creatures.²⁰⁹ The game was a worldwide success and one of the most discussed games of the year, played both by children and their parents, who might have been playing the original video game in their childhood²¹⁰. In the past someone playing Pokémon was seen as a nerd, but as contemporary cultures have started to accept nerds more, the new version of this game was not seen as embarrassing²¹¹. However, the meme discussed here was

²⁰⁹ “Parents’ Guide to Pokémon,” *Pokémon.com*, <http://www.pokemon.com/us/parents-guide/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

²¹⁰ James Surowiecki, “Is Pokémon Go’s Success Sustainable?,” *The New Yorker*, July 16 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/is-pokemon-gos-success-sustainable> (accessed March 18, 2017).

²¹¹ Raymond Wong, “You Shouldn’t Be Ashamed of Playing ‘Pokémon Go’ and Loving It,” *Mashable*, July 16 2016, http://mashable.com/2016/07/16/pokemon-go-embarrassed/#hknY_tv_bkqc (accessed March 18, 2017).

already posted in 2012, meaning that the game had not yet reached its new triumph and was still a nerdy interest. Therefore, stating you play the game and wanting to be referred as someone mastering it was not a popular thing to do. The OP is still being proud of who they are and enjoying the things the mainstream depicts as awkward. Showing pride in playing a video game shows pride in being a nerd – it disregards the popular opinion. Interestingly, if the same meme had been posted four years later, the interpretation and reaction could have been different.

The nerd in this meme is also showing he or she is part of the larger nerd culture, by referring to a game that is popular inside the subculture. To understand the meme one needs to know what a Pokémon is. The meme thus requires intertextual knowledge and certain literacy. Benjamin Woo highlights in his study about nerd culture how nerds often have vast knowledge about their interests and widely use references to cultural elements depicted nerdy. This is one way of showing participation in the subculture.²¹² As Ryan Milner reminds, when it comes to memes, digital literacy is not the only skill a person should have: they also need “subcultural literacy” to understand and produce memes in the dialect that is collectively shared inside that specific subculture²¹³. To understand the meaning of some of these nerd memes, a person needs to understand nerd culture itself. When analyzing the meme *Pokémon master* this is visible when noting that the receiver needs to know the elements of the franchise, because it helps to notice the image itself is a reference to equipment used within the game. Stating you are not just a nerd, but also a master in a video game, is a part of subcultural dialect. When the meme was posted, knowing details related to the video game would mean you are a member of nerd culture. Wanting to identify as a master in a game is a form of superior nerdiness, also simply because the OP in addition can be claiming to be better at the game than others.

A third way to show pride in being a nerd is to lift yourself up by highlighting your qualities or skills and/or to support others who are a part of the community. These create empowerment inside nerd culture, arming nerds against bullies. An example

²¹² Benjamin Woo, “Alpha Nerds: Cultural Intermediaries in a Subcultural Scene,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 661–662.

²¹³ Milner, “World Made Meme,” 107.

of an empowering meme is *Never apologize*²¹⁴. It is not a typical meme because it has six images under each other, each having a couple of lines of text in it. The meme looks to be made from a video clip, taking still images from each frame. The situation in the images is most likely a convention as it shows a known actor on a stage with a microphone, answering questions from a fan in the audience. This is a common occurrence in e.g. comic conventions, where comic book creators or stars of films participate in panel discussions. The actor in this meme is John Barrowman²¹⁵, who has acted especially in sci-fi television series, e.g. in *Doctor Who* (2005–)²¹⁶ which is a show widely followed by nerds across the world. In the first image a subtitle like text tells that an un-pictured fan from the audience says: “Hi, um, I would apologize for being nerdy but we’re all you know...” The second frame starts with a line from Barrowman asking “Apologize for what?” followed by an answer from the fan: “Being nerdy, but we’re on the Internet...” The next four images show Barrowman telling the fan: “Don’t ever apo... Hey, just because you’re in a room full of nerds, even outside, never apologize for being nerdy. Because you know what? Non-nerds don’t apologize for being dickheads!” The last image with the last sentence also shows Barrowman raising his fist up in the air as a sign of resistance and unity.

An admired sci-fi actor telling his fans to never apologize for who they are is an empowering act for the community. Someone nerds look up to stating that being nerdy is more than okay and something to be proud of is a statement that helps to create self-acceptance and to unify nerds. The humor in this meme comes from Barrowman calling non-nerds “dickheads”; ignorant bullies who do not apologize for being mean. This is used to empower nerds against bullying and ridiculing. Barrowman is at the same time declaring himself as a nerd too, showing he is a part of the community and on their side.

The main ways to show pride and superiority in the memes of this category are to use certain words and supporting others or yourself. Pride in being a nerd creates empowerment inside the subculture. This category is the second largest in the

²¹⁴ See Appendix 1.

²¹⁵ “John Barrowman,” *IMDb*, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0057882/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

²¹⁶ The BBC show first aired in 1963–1989 and was brought back with new episodes in 2005.

Superior group, thus showing that nerds are becoming a stronger subculture on the inside. This pride and empowerment appear to be part of the new nerd culture, which embraces its elements and members.

5.3 Aggressively Arrogant

Even more than showing pride in their nerdiness, nerds present themselves superior rather arrogantly. These memes relate to nerds being aggressively proud of who they are, what they like, and thinking they know things better than non-nerds, not needing the “real world” and its norms. These memes are often very ironic, which makes them humorous instead of aggressive. Here nerds are using rebellious humor to show they do not care about social rules.

One way to empower the stereotypically looking nerds in these memes is to aggressively attack the previous bullying. The meme *Aggressive karate nerd* is one version of a template that repeats itself several times in the entire data. *Aggressive karate nerd* is a picture of a white teenager male in martial arts outfit, looking like a stereotypical nerd with large glasses, acne, and undone hair. The picture looks like a portrait taken by a photography studio, and based on the style of the glasses the male is wearing it is from the 1980s. The meme has four lines of text: “They laughed at me when i [sic] fell off my bike. I laughed at them when they fell of [sic] the cliff.” The meme thus refers to someone teasing the male in the image for falling off of his bike and him revenging by laughing at them later. The fact that the nerd laughs when the others fall off a cliff can be interpreted in him pushing them down and deliberately hurting people who made him feel humiliated earlier. This is a rather aggressive reaction to being bullied, and shows that nerds feel arrogantly superior because they are not as weak and hopeless as their bullies think²¹⁷. This superiority is portrayed through aggressive humor. Saying that a nerdy male is not just a loser, but can actually fight back, is supposed to create laughter.

²¹⁷ However, the grammar mistakes in the meme could also indicate that the meme was made by a non-nerd, because nerds are not depicted to make mistakes with their grammar. The meme would then be mocking the nerd for trying to look tough and masculine. This is a possible interpretation of the meme, but when comparing it to the other similar memes in the data, the overall interpretation is closer to the Superior group than the Loser group.

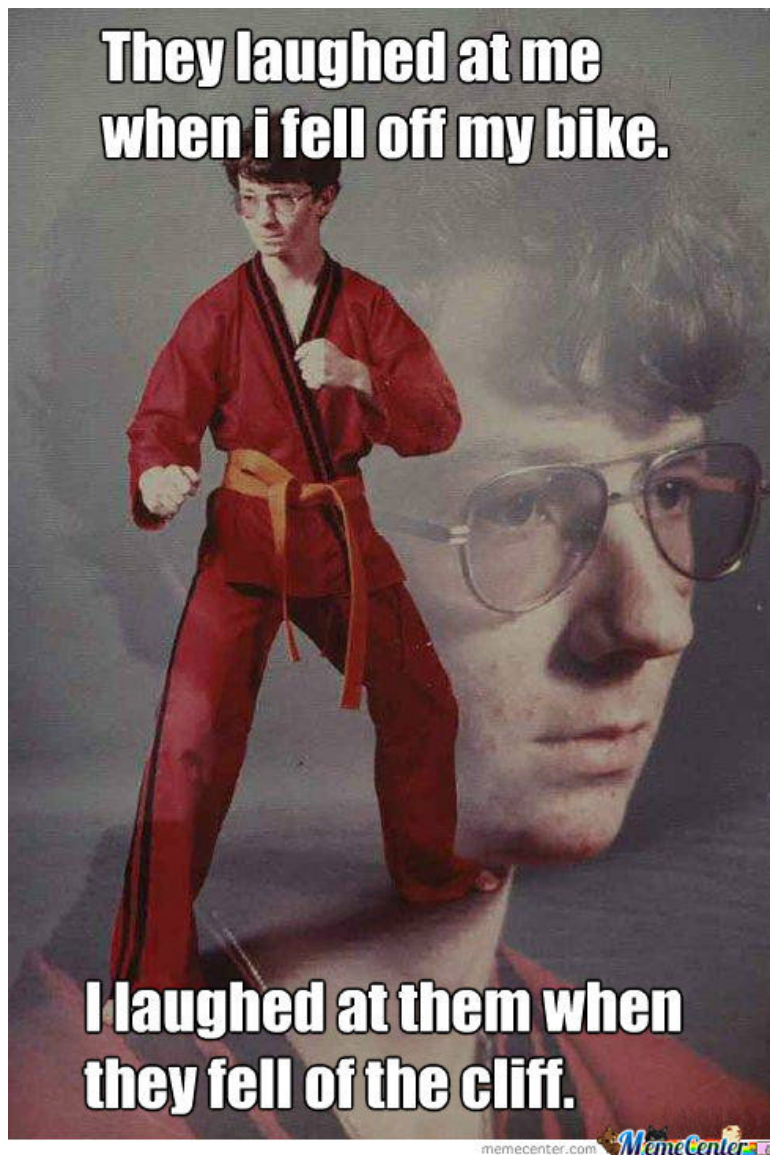


Image 13: Aggressive karate nerd.

The meme plays with the stereotypical nerd representation, and intense interests – karate or other form of martial arts. The nerd in *Aggressive karate nerd* does not have a traditionally masculine physique, as he does not look muscular. But, the meme suggests that the male is intelligent and able to use martial arts to his advantage when it comes to his bullies. Here self-irony creates the joke, highlighting that even the nerdiest male can be dangerous. In addition, I argue that this meme can be linked to the contemporary revenges of bullied nerds. As mentioned earlier, nerds are not as helpless against their bullies on the Internet as memes in Loser group might suggest. Internet being their playground, a nerd's revenge can be aggressive and unexpected. Coleman points out especially the so-called Internet trolls:

Trolls work to remind the “masses” that have lapped onto the shores of the Internet that there is still a class of geeks who, as their name suggests, will cause Internet grief, hell, and misery; examples of trolling are legion.²¹⁸

Coleman continues to argue that contemporary hackers and trolls are more interested in aggressive pranking and leaking classified information and are seen as a nuisance, whereas the hackers of 1980s and 1990s were more focused on actually illegal acts, and therefore being hunted down by e.g. the FBI²¹⁹. The Internet offers an easier place for revenges, as everything can be done anonymously and without having to confront the bullies face-to-face. There are several memes that indicate retaliation done by nerds, presented through light jokes. The nerds in these memes are often using sarcasm when talking back to their bullies, saying insults that very usually go past the bullies understanding. The nerds come out of these situations as winners, as superior beings who through arrogance showed that they are not weak. I argue that the empowerment that has happened inside nerd culture has also made nerds more confident when facing their oppressors.

According to my data, the difference between a photo and a cartoon version of the Butthurt Dweller character is that very often the latter shows nerds being arrogantly superior – the real-life image is usually used to mock nerds. An example of these under the arrogant category is the meme *At least not pink*, which has a cartoon Butthurt. The meme has a frame from an old video game, where a soldier tells a nerd to “get the heck out of here”. Under this is a 8 bit style drawn Butthurt stating that he might be a nerd but at least he is not wearing a pink uniform like the soldier is. Wearing pink is here linked to being homosexual, which according to the meme is worse than being a nerd: they are even lower on the social hierarchy than nerds. Connell puts homosexuals in the subordinate masculinities group, more specifically in the very “bottom of a hierarchy among men”²²⁰. Hegemonic masculinity is also said to include homophobia²²¹. The meme *At least not pink* connects nerds to the dominant masculine world because the nerd is acting like a “real” man, laughing at the accused homosexual. Normally nerds are placed in the same subordinate group as

²¹⁸ Coleman, “Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls”, 110.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 105–112.

²²⁰ Connell, *Masculinities*, 78–79.

²²¹ Ibid.

homosexuals, but this memes shows that, by being aggressive and arrogant, nerds are able to feel like they are more masculine. The laughter comes from mocking someone who is even lesser in the society, stating that nerds are not the “worst” there is. Therefore it is accepted to laugh at the fact that a character in a game is wearing pink and is allegedly homosexual: the nerd feels superior for not being the outcast this time. This meme thus also shows the retaliation mentality contemporary nerds have based on some of the memes in this category.

In addition, the cartoon type Butthurt is very often used in memes talking about the opposite sex and how to succeed with them. The tone in these memes can be interpreted as arrogant and thus superior. Or, the receiver might want to cringe because the tone is vulgar and pretentious. In the latter case these memes can be interpreted as part of the Loser group, because the nerd in the meme thinks he is being suave with women, when he in fact is acting in a disturbing and demeaning way. In both cases these memes tend to degrade women and show them as brainless, which is done through arrogant jokes and innuendos. As an example of how a cartoon Butthurt is used in memes about successful relationships – the fourth category under the Superior group – I chose meme *Nerdy innuendo* to discuss further. The meme consist of two images. On the top there is a picture of two blonde, model-looking females wearing bathing suits and sunglasses while laying on beach chairs. The female on the right is wearing a swimsuit the patter of which resembles a video game controller and its buttons. The female on the left is pretending to push one of the buttons that is close to the crotch area, while the female on the right is pouting her lips and having her hand close to her mouth. Below this picture is a cartoon Butthurt wearing a suit, looking conceited. Under his image is a text saying: “If you know what I mean”, in red letters.



If you know what I mean

Image 14: Nerdy innuendo.

The text line is rather arrogant, and it is visible in several other memes in my data as well. The phrase is often used as a hint for sexual relations, as a type of flirting. The fact that Butthurt is wearing a suit makes him a little classier and masculine than the real-life version of the character. In fact, in this meme Butthurt's face is actually added to another meme characters body. The suit belongs to "If you know what I mean" meme template, which is originally a cartoon version of the television character Mr. Bean, played by actor Rowan Atkinson. The meme is usually utilized to show that a meme has a double meaning, "commonly in the form of sexual

innuendo”²²². Here adding Butthurt’s face to this established and known meme template links the meme to online culture, and shows the confident superiority nerds too can have. In this meme the nerd is hinting how pressing the buttons on the female’s swimsuit would be a sexual thing to do. The females are also clearly flirting to the camera, enhancing the sexual tension in the picture. The pattern on the swimsuit refers to something nerds are interested in, therefore meaning that nerds would know how to press the buttons because they know how to use a video game controller. The females are objectified in this meme, showing them as just sexual beings. In addition, blonde women are often thought to be rather ignorant and empty-headed. Here the Butthurt character seems overconfident in a superior way: he is stating that he would know how to sexually please these women because of his gaming experience. By objectifying these women the nerd is claiming to be the same kind of masculine as non-nerd males, and to be successful in relationships because of his skills. This is challenging social norms and the old ideas of masculinity.

Like the *Aggressive karate nerd* meme shows, some memes in this category are almost attacking non-nerds with arrogance. In these memes laughter is created by subduing other people, stating that they are lesser and can thus be laughed at. The humor strategy is rebellious humor, because nerds are fighting back against the societal norms and ideas. The aggressiveness can be interpreted as a way to tell a joke, or to relieve one’s accumulated frustration from being the target of bullying and ridicule in the past. This aggressive behavior can also cause negativity, and reinforce the unfavorable stereotypes linked to nerds. In addition, mocking non-nerds for being inferior shows that nerds are not any better when it comes to valuing different kinds of people: the aggressiveness can makes nerds look close-minded. The “polysemic potential” of this reverse type humor²²³ is presenting how difficult and multisided interpreting humor can be. It is good to remember that humor is always shared and it needs the approval of others. A joke is not a joke if no one laughs.²²⁴

As I presented before, the fact that digital culture became more common and technology mundane changed the ways nerds are depicted. Based on my data, one

²²² “If You Know What I Mean”, *Know Your Meme*, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/if-you-know-what-i-mean> (accessed April 19, 2017).

²²³ Weaver, “The ‘Other’ Laughs Back,” 32.

²²⁴ Critchley, *On Humour*, 79–80.

way to define nerd identities is humor, especially self-irony. Modern day nerdism presents itself as playfully humoristic, and for example includes a lot of references to popular culture elements that are liked inside nerd culture. This shows that despite wanting to be accepted in the society nerds also want to keep their culture to themselves. Shared sense of humor connects people because it operates as a secret code or language. Humor is thus a form of insider knowledge of a certain culture.²²⁵

In this chapter I have presented memes that discuss nerds as superior beings. These memes show how nerds are turning the past ridicule around by using self-ridicule and rebellious humor. Some of the memes in the Superior group include humor that is playful and mischievous. It shows that nerds can also laugh at themselves. Other memes are demonstrating that bullying will not harm nerds anymore, because they are proud of who they are and ready to defend themselves and their community. These memes are often arrogant and aggressive, highlighting qualities that make nerds better than the rest of the people. Nerds are forcefully defending themselves, and through humor creating an image of super humans.

Memes discussed in this chapter also create a new kind of masculinity, by presenting qualities and features that are admired in the contemporary society. Intelligence, for instance, is surpassing strength as a desired quality in a male, making nerds and their brains more wanted. Changes like these are therefore creating new social norms – a claim that is supported by previous research. The way nerds see women, and talk about them, is an interesting topic and already visible in the *Nerdy innuendo* meme discussed above. To continue on this topic, I will move on to my last analysis chapter, which introduces the issues concerning girl nerds.

²²⁵ Critchley, *On Humour*, 67–68.

6. The Girl Nerd Dilemma

There are only 24 memes tagged with the girl nerd category in the entire data. They do, therefore, provide an interesting deviation. Even this small amount of memes shows that there is an issue when it comes to nerd culture and females. As briefly mentioned earlier, male nerds do not believe in the existence of nerdy girls. They think anyone claiming to be one is a pretender. Only three of the memes tagged under this group can be interpreted as positive, having nerdy females either defend themselves or give witty answers to bullying men. Girl nerds are said to not exist, yet based on the memes a male nerd's dream is still to have a nerdy girlfriend with whom they could share their interests. The contradiction is quite visible and thereby interesting, showing that nerd culture itself includes a paradox.

Memes talking about girl nerds in my data ridicule females for trying to be something they allegedly are not, or at least are not supposed to be. The humor used in these memes is mean and mocking. The memes claim that females cannot be nerds, only males can. It is interesting that nerd culture, which likes to promote itself as an open community for everyone who enjoys the same things, is so anti-female when it comes to the question of who can identify as a nerd. In these memes nerd culture ridicules its members, but not in an empowering way. The humor about women is not sarcastic or self-ridiculing: it is degrading and ostracizing female nerds. This is excluding women from the nerd community, and so creating inner and outer groups *inside* the subculture.

In this chapter I will first discuss how nerd culture is based on male hegemony²²⁶, and how men define girl nerds – and females altogether. After this I will discuss how male nerds seem to depict female nerds as threats, which has lead to internal conflicts of social hierarchies. Both of these themes are linked to power structures and maintaining them. Here this battle of powers is not between nerds and non-nerds, but men and women. This chapter will therefore discusses the gendered politics inside nerd culture, and how those are used to create humor.

²²⁶ By "hegemony" I mean "the process of moral, philosophical, and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups". See Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 1–4.

6.1 Male Nerd Hegemony

Memes discussing girl nerds show a distinction between males and females, drawing a clear line between genders. My data presents a mostly misogynistic way of seeing girl nerds. Like I have discussed in the earlier chapters, being a nerd is usually linked to being a male, meaning that the power inside nerd culture resides with males. Therefore, male nerds are the ones who decide how certain things are in the community, and also how e.g. women are depicted and defined. Women are either portrayed as sexual objects, or labeled fake and pretenders if they claim to be nerds. Despite girl nerd memes being a deviant among the larger data, these tendencies are still clear.

According to the theory of hegemonic masculinity, men are in the leading roles and places in contemporary societies²²⁷, thus being the ones deciding about norms and meanings – or at least thinking they have the power to do so. I argue that this links to why female nerds are being called fake: male nerds have more power and are able to create definitions, and decide who can actually *be* a nerd. Cynthia Cockburn notes that dividing things into masculine and feminine is a “cultural process of immense power”²²⁸. Meaning, that the one with the most power in the society has the ability to create these kinds of divisions. R.W. Connell explains genders to be “ways in which social practice is ordered”.²²⁹ In my data this is done through ridicule. By using mostly disciplinary humor, male nerds are showing how the society is supposed to be structured, and who is higher in social hierarchy.

Mostafa Abenidifard connects Michael Billig’s ideas of ridicule as the center of social life to Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinities, and argues that “ridicule is a universal tool used in sustaining the gender order”, especially in Anglo-American societies²³⁰. This is visible in memes about girl nerds. By ridiculing females who are saying they are nerds too, male nerds are reinforcing their hegemonic status in the society. Abenidifard’s argument is relevant and useful when

²²⁷ Connell, *Masculinities*, 76–78.

²²⁸ Cynthia Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men and Technical Know-How* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 12.

²²⁹ Connell, *Masculinities*, 71.

²³⁰ Mostafa Abenidifard, “Ridicule, Gender Hegemony, and the Disciplinary Function of Mainstream Gender Humour,” *Social Semiotics* 26, no. 3 (2016): 234–235.

looking at the memes in this category. Nerds are able to show superiority by defining females as inferior. Changing the social hierarchies in the society at large is a difficult process, which is why e.g. the rebellious humor – which nerds are using against non-nerds – is only slowly starting to change things. By targeting females, male nerds can make sure they are powerful at least inside their own subculture.

One clear way male nerds are showing their superiority inside the culture is by calling girl nerds by names and humiliating them for making mistakes. A recognized Internet meme template concerning the girl nerd topic is called “Idiot Nerd Girl”. It pictures a teenage girl on a pink and purple background, wearing large glasses. The girl has written “NerD” [sic] on her left palm and is showing it to the camera. According to Know Your Meme, this template is used to mock girls who claim they are nerds. These girls refer to a popular element inside nerd culture, but make a mistake with the reference, showing they do not actually know the niche. The upper text line in these memes refers to the element of nerd culture, and the bottom line(s) show that the girl is ignorant.²³¹ According to Ryan Milner, these memes criticize young girls for their “subcultural illiteracy or unintelligence”²³², which in this case shows they are not “real” nerds. I argue that these memes link to the rise of nerd culture and its popularity: younger audiences want to prove they are a part of this popular trend, but instead end up showing their lack of knowledge and thus embarrassing themselves in the eyes of actual nerds. Nerds seem to scrutinize especially women for even the smallest mistakes. These memes use disciplinary humor to show females that only males can be real nerds. That seems to be the social hierarchy and it cannot be changed.

My data includes nine of these Idiot Nerd Girl memes, being the most common meme type concerning nerdy girls. One example is seen under this paragraph (image 15). The text in this meme says: “I love Star Wars, Darth Invader is my favorite”. Here the female is stating that she likes the *Star Wars* sci-fi movies, but embarrasses herself by making a mistake with a character’s name: it is Darth *Vader*, not Darth

²³¹ “Idiot Nerd Girl,” *Know Your Meme*, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/idiot-nerd-girl> (accessed March 23, 2017.).

²³² Milner, “World Made Meme,” 158.

Invader. She is, thus, showing she is not a real nerd but a “wannabe”, claiming to be something she is not.

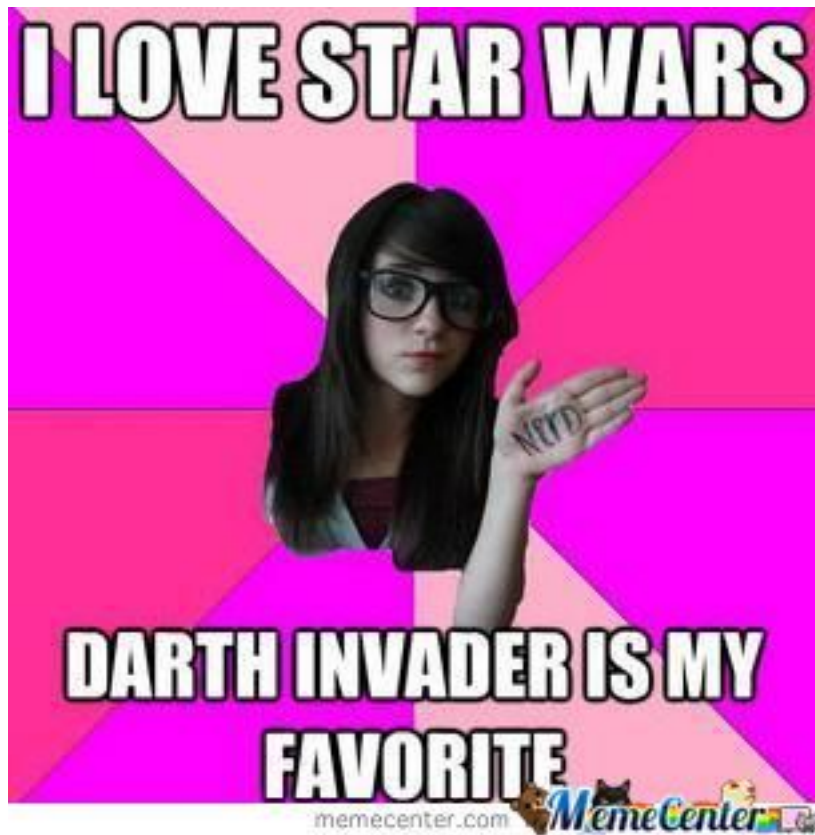


Image 15: Idiot nerd girl.

Similar theme in this category can be seen in memes that are stating females with large glasses are just pretenders, sometimes “attention whores”, for trying to be nerdy. These memes are aggressive towards females. Memes with nerdy females in them, other than the Idiot Nerd Girl type, very often use words like “fake” and “wannabe” when stating the female is not who she pretends to be. Joseph Reagle discusses the fake nerd dilemma in his article, stating how real nerds – or geeks – feel annoyed by women who are pretending to be nerdy only because it is “cool”, or to get attention. This thematic is explicitly connected to women, not to men, which highlights how gendered the nerd culture actually is.²³³

I argue that the fact that being a nerd today is somewhat “cool” and accepted leads to “real” nerds easily labeling other people as imposters. The memes in my data claim

²³³ Joseph Reagle, “Geek Policing: Fake Geek Girls and Contested Attention,” *International Journal of Communication*, no. 9 (2015): 2863–2868.

that large glasses do not make you a nerd, nor does liking merely one element of the culture, e.g. a sci-fi movie. The memes do not, however, tell what *would* make someone a nerd. Since there is no mention of which definite features a nerd *should* have, there is also no clear reason coming forth to as why girls could not be nerds. In addition, these memes present a narrow understanding of femininity: females are thought to only like “girly” things – make-up, fashion, and pop-stars – not computer games or LARPing. This of course is not the whole truth, but more of a traditional viewpoint of what is feminine and what is masculine. Thus, traditional and old gender representations are very present even in these contemporary memes.

Michael Billig points out that already Freud discussed this kind of derogatory humor. Freud used the term “smut”, which he explained to be the kind of talk men use when talking about women in a disparaging way, often as a revenge because the man did not get (sexual) attention from a woman.²³⁴ This can be connected to the ways these memes refer to nerdy women: nerds not being successful with the opposite sex turn to degrading all women, because they have been rejected so many times. Calling a woman “attention whore”, claiming all females are desperate for attention and willing to say anything in order to get it, shows that male nerds might have past disappointments with women. This is done through joking, yet the humor is aggressive and harsh. Furthermore, Kendall argues that the male nerds in her studies saw themselves as “nice guys” who had been ignored by women, claiming women are only interested in “jerks” who treat them badly²³⁵. This could help explain why some of the memes in my data tend to portray male nerds resentful towards women. Declaring women cannot be nerds almost seems like a payback from all the times male nerds were turned down by their romantic interests. As I presented in chapter 4.3, nerds are depicted to be failing with romantic relationships because of their looks and interests. A nerdy male, no matter how nice on the inside, is not able to attract women and might therefore have grudges towards all women.

Another interesting point when discussing female representations in nerd memes is how most females are presented attractive, and possibly popular. This is the opposite of how male nerds are depicted. This might be one of the reasons why male nerds

²³⁴ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 162.

²³⁵ Kendall, “”Oh No! I’m a Nerd!”,” 266–267.

claim females cannot be part of the subculture: they do not fit inside the stereotypical nerd representation because of their looks. Attractive females cannot be real nerds, because nerds cannot be attractive. This can be linked to the *Pop culture vs. reality* meme examined in chapter 4.1 as well: the attractive male in the meme could be depicted as a fake nerd because his physical qualities do not match the nerd stereotype. Based on the data, a part of identifying as a nerd are the undesired looks and the insecurities possibly caused by them. However, male nerds in these memes seem to think all females should be beautiful and desirable, which, in turn, again excludes them from nerd culture. The stereotypical nerd representation is very heavily based on physical looks, and states that to be a nerd is to look certain way and to be undesirable. Based on the entire data, nerds are trying to change their stereotype, especially the assumption that every nerd looks like a Butthurt Dweller. Yet in memes about girl nerds, attractiveness is presented as a quality that shows someone is *not* a nerd, preventing the stereotype from changing.

Interestingly, one of these girl nerd memes shows what nerd males would want, how they would want their potential girlfriend to be. Meme *What nerds want* shows an attractive young female, wearing very short shorts and a top with *Star Wars* print on it. She is holding an 8-bit Nintendo video game console²³⁶. The female is rather curvy, has long hair and smooth looking skin. She is presented as the “perfect” girl for nerds: interested in their niche *and* good-looking, being the ultimate dream come true. The original title of the meme, given by the OP, is “What every nerd wants. No, what every man wants.” showing that the image is indeed supposed to depict a male nerd’s dream girl. The meme can appear to be humorous if interpreted as that a girl like the one in the meme does not exist – she is too perfect to be real. Or, alternatively, the meme can be interpreted to portray how stereotypical nerds would never get a girl like her, no matter how much they would wish. This would then be ridiculing nerds for being failures with relationships.

²³⁶ The game console was one of the first ones, and has nowadays reached and iconic status. Nintendo launched a miniature version of the original console last year, selling out in just a few days. See e.g. Luke Graham, “Nintendo Sells Nearly 200,000 Units of Its Mini Retro Console,” *CNBC.com*, December 16, 2016, <http://www.cnbc.com/2016/12/16/nintendo-sells-196000-nes-classic-edition-retro-console.html> (accessed April 28, 2017).



Image 16: What nerds want.

The paradox here is that male nerds do not seem to believe these kinds of girl nerds actually exist – they are just a mere daydream. A male nerd wants a nerdy, attractive girlfriend, but those two things do not exist together. This means they can never have the type of relationships they wish for. To prove the point, there is one meme in the data that states this same issue: an image of an overweight, glasses-wearing male nerd by his computer, with text lines stating “says he wants a nerdy girlfriend, calls every girl gamer “fake” and “attention whores”.” The contradiction is clearly noticed inside the culture as well, yet does not seem to have changed for the better. The meme makes fun of male nerds for having unrealistic expectations about their possible partners, and also for not believing girl nerds exist.

Lori Kendall’s study about male nerds on an online forum shows how males tend to see women as sexual objects. Talking about this is done through joking. Kendall discusses how most of the men were not in romantic relationships and had been in celibacy “more or less by choice”²³⁷ for years. The men saw women as unattainable

²³⁷ Kendall, ““Oh No! I’m a Nerd!”,” 266.

and were often using self-ridicule when discussing the topic. In addition, Kendall argues how “the sexual possession of a woman” is a key element in being masculine, and that nerds too want to accomplish this.²³⁸ The meme *What nerds want* shows the same: male nerds see the female in the picture as an object, something to desire and obtain. In addition, Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish argue in their article about gendered and feminist jokes how sexist humor is not a thing of the past²³⁹. They point out how such humor “portrays them [women] as stupid, illogical, ignorant, or irresponsible”, which builds on “sexual objectification of women”²⁴⁰. These are all visible in the examples I have presented in this subchapter.

Using certain words to define female nerds is a way to show who has the power inside nerd culture – who is higher in the social hierarchy. This power play has moved from non-nerds bullying nerds, to male nerds bullying female nerds. Calling girl nerds attention whores and fake is showing that nerd culture is somewhat conservative and male-focused, even in our contemporary world. I argue that this power play exists because male nerds feel threatened by female nerds. As nerds are depicted male and because technology is linked to masculinity, male nerds feel intimidated by females who claim they are also part of the subculture. I will explain and discuss this argument more, next.

²³⁸ Kendall, “”Oh No! I’m a Nerd!”,” 263–266. Quote from page 264.

²³⁹ Shifman, Limor and Dafna Lemish. “”Mars and Venus’ in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and the Internet,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2011): 253–254.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

6.2 Girl Nerds as a Threat

Cynthia Cockburn connects computers to masculinity in her book *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men, and Technical Know-how* by stating how technology is linked to sexual identities: “femininity is incompatible with technological competence; to feel technically competent is to feel manly.”²⁴¹ Thus, a female cannot be a nerd because nerds are supposed to be good with computers, but females do not understand technology. Computers are seen as “masculine domain”²⁴², meaning women have no business inside nerd culture. Consequently, if a woman claims she understands computers as well as a male does, it deprives nerds from the only link to masculinity they think they have. These kinds of thinking patterns appear odd and conservative in our contemporary digitally focused societies. Today everyone needs to know how to use technology to be a part of the society and to succeed.

In addition, Kendall argues that male nerds need their status of being technologically talented to counterbalance the fact that they are not depicted attractive or to have other masculine qualities:

Nerdism in both men and women is held to decrease sexual attractiveness, but in men this is compensated by the relatively masculine values attached to intelligence and computer skills. In women, lack of sexual attractiveness is a far greater sin.²⁴³

Kendall states that girl nerds are expected to be both intelligent and attractive, unlike male nerds. However, my data presents women as attractive in almost all the memes women are discussed in, but these women are not shown as intelligent. Based on these memes being beautiful means you are not intelligent, and vice versa. This gives male nerds the chance to ridicule someone else for a change. Most of the memes with attractive females are presenting a mistake these females made, either with the nerdy niche or mathematical equations, showing their unintelligence. As an example of the opposite, a cartoon comic strip meme, showing Bill Gates’ “daughter”, pictures the female as a stereotypical nerd representation. The fact that she is Gates’ child is supposed to intend that she is intelligent, like her father. But because she is intelligent, she is not presented attractive.

²⁴¹ Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance*, 12.

²⁴² Kendall, ““Oh No! I’m a Nerd!”,” 261.

²⁴³ Ibid., 265.

Nevertheless, as women have been claiming their places in nerd culture as well, male nerds appear to feel threatened. If women can be talented with technology and be good at gaming, does it make male nerds less masculine? I argue that this technological intelligence – and succeeding in life because of it – is the only connection male nerds have to masculinity. Therefore females showing similar interests and skills reduces this connection. The new kind of masculinity has been building itself on technological intelligence and monetary wealth, finally lifting male nerds higher on social hierarchies and connecting them to hegemonic masculinity. But now their status is threatened again. The new masculinity has been a way for nerds to re-create their identities. Females claiming to be nerds are jeopardizing this re-creation, making male nerds take up a defensive position in order to protect who they are.

Memes that present this thematic are using disciplinary humor, because they reinforce the existing social hierarchies and power structures inside nerd culture. Male nerds feel threatened by women who are trying to prove they are nerds too, and ridicule them based on the simple fact that they are women. Meme *Attention whore* is an example of this. It is a Rage Comic with six stacked frames. A female cartoon head is telling a cartoon Butthurt that she plays *World of Warcraft*, a multiplayer online computer game that is popular among nerds. Butthurt does not believe her, saying that she is just an “attention whore” for claiming such. The last frame shows a topless, thin girl from behind, sitting in front of a computer, presumably playing said game. The female is shown with a thought bubble, inside which there is the cartoon head again, this time as a crying “forever alone”²⁴⁴ face. The male does not believe that the girl actually plays the game, branding her an imposter who only wants attention from men. The female would like to be recognized as a member of the gaming community, but is rejected.

²⁴⁴ As mentioned in chapter 4.3 when examining the meme *Forever alone*, this cartoon face is used to show failure in social life. The failure is often connected to males not succeeding with females, but here the situation is turned around, yet the reference is still clear. For more, see Milner, “The World Made Meme,” 144–147.



Image 17: Attention whore.

Another meme, a comic strip where a girl wants to invite two males to play a new video game, also presents the same theme. The males do not believe a girl could actually know about the game, let alone play it, and add that the girl should go “back to the kitchen”, where she belongs. Stating this shows women are still seen in a

conservative way, only expected to take care of the house. Both of these examples continue the way the memes, examined earlier, ridiculed women by calling them names and stating they are pretenders. The reason for this is that these women are showing knowledge about the subculture, opposed to the Idiot Nerd Girl type memes where the female is portrayed ignorant. This knowledge is showing a certain level of intelligence, which then intimidates male nerds.

Male nerds are hiding their fear of change and the fact that they feel intimidated by ridiculing women and degrading them, using traditional and outdated gender roles. Mary Douglas's theory, about how things in "wrong places" confuse social order, fits within this group of memes as well. Male nerds are treating girl nerds the same way non-nerds are treating nerds, because they feel threatened by the changes in the social hierarchy. Girl nerd memes present how this thematic exists inside nerd culture: if a woman states she is a nerd, she is entering spaces she should not be in, thus becoming "dirt" in the wrong place.²⁴⁵ Male nerds feel threatened when a female claims to be a part of the subculture, because it is "new" and uncomfortable. This seems to give male nerds the permission to ridicule and disrespect female nerds, and in that way show they are not appreciated or accepted. It is interesting how nerds use the same tactics their own bullies have used for decades. Girl nerds seem to create a perfect target for male nerds to attack, and use that as a revenge for all the ridicule they have suffered – both from females and non-nerds.

Disciplinary humor is used to make sure all the "pretenders" know how things are inside nerd culture: there are certain rules and ways of existing, and those are decided by men. Stuart Hall quotes J. Kristeva when arguing that many cultures tend to close up in order to keep non-members out²⁴⁶. Male nerds are trying to keep women out of their territory by making the symbolic "borders" of their culture very specific, and stating how membership requires very detailed knowledge – e.g. about video games or comic books. It is as if they are creating a secret society, a club, or a brotherhood, that chooses its members carefully and aims to keep intruders out. The females who prove they have the required knowledge are still instantly labeled as fake, showing that male nerds are not ready to share their nerdism.

²⁴⁵ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 40–41, 114.

²⁴⁶ Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'," 226.

In addition, I argue that the threat male nerds feel is not only linked to the masculine connotations of technology. Male nerds are often depicted as feminine, as I presented earlier in this thesis. Thus, what does it mean for these “feminine” males, if a woman, who by traditional gender definition would be feminine, claims to be a nerd? Nerds seem to be afraid that by accepting women as a part of nerd culture physically feminine looking male nerds would look even more feminine: they could not appear masculine when placed next to females. Physical looks are a part of a person’s identity, so a situation like this could confuse male nerds’ identities. Most of all, this would mix up the traditional social hierarchies, where males are supposed to be higher than females. If male nerds cannot present themselves as clearly more masculine in their physique than female nerds, they could lose their power status.

To conclude, male nerds in my data ridicule girl nerds because they feel intimidated. By accepting that women too can e.g. be skillful with computers male nerds would lose their hegemonic status, and the only link to masculinity they have finally acquired. The three positive girl nerd memes in my data show that this does not have to be the only truth. For instance, one of them is a GIF of a male asking a glasses-wearing girl in a school hallway what her bra size is. The girl answers that it is as much as multiplying the length of the male’s penis by ten, and adding his IQ to the sum. This meme uses sarcastic and witty humor to show that the girl might have large breasts, connecting her to the desired feminine looks, but that she is also intelligent and thereby superior to the blunt male. The fact that the girl is wearing glasses and uses a mathematical equation in her answer shows that she is a nerd, as these qualities are part of the stereotypical nerd representation.

Girl nerds are making themselves seen and heard, which is helping to change the outdated representations. More tech companies have started to hire more women in higher positions, despite the percentage still being low, proving that it is not just ordinary nerds who do not accept nerdy females²⁴⁷. Girl nerds are also campaigning for visibility and respect. For instance, in 2014 a group of gamer girls organized a

²⁴⁷ See e.g. Maya Kosoff, “Here’s Evidence That it’s Still Not a Great Time to be a Woman in Silicon Valley”, *Business Insider*, January 2, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/women-hold-just-11-of-executive-positions-at-silicon-valley-tech-companies-2015-1?r=US&IR=T&IR=T> (both accessed April 20, 2017).

campaign to end the harassment they were facing inside the gaming communities – especially after being threatened for questioning the way women are usually presented in video games²⁴⁸. Still, according to memes about girl nerds it is clear the change inside the culture is slow. Women are seen as a threat, intruding the domain that has been masculine in the past. It is possible that girl nerds might have to go through the same process male nerds have had to, in order to gain respect and acceptance.

²⁴⁸ See e.g. Nick Wingfield, "Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in 'GamerGate' Campaign," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/16/technology/gamergate-women-video-game-threats-anita-sarkeesian.html?_r=0 (accessed April 1, 2017).

7. Conclusions

Nerds play an important role in the contemporary digitally focused societies. They were the minds behind the development of computers and the Internet, and continue being the creative forces generating new technological and scientific innovations. Nerd culture often presents and creates itself through humor, especially on the Internet. This case study of nerd memes showed how different humor strategies are used to create laughter, and how this humor is maintaining or challenging social order, social norms, and stereotypes online.

I examined 300 nerd memes using thematic, qualitative content analysis. Meme studies and humor studies provided a theoretical framework that helped to study the commonly used humor strategies. I argued that nerd memes can be divided into three key groups based on the themes they are using as a source of laughter: nerds are ridiculed and labeled losers based on the stereotypical features connected to them, or nerds show their superiority by highlighting their talents and in that way empower themselves. Additionally, girl nerds are labeled fake, or not believed to exist at all.

The themes that are used in these memes focus on physical features, interests, and social relationships. The contemporary nerd representation is an exaggeration of the old stereotype, highlighting the features the mainstream does not deem desired. Today it is the intensity of nerdy interests that is laughed at – not the interest itself. Contemporary nerds are visibly proud of who they are and what they are interested in. Failing with social life is a big part of both the old and new representation.

There were more memes in the Loser group than in the Superior group, which tells that nerds are still depicted in a negative way. The fact that the difference in numbers is not large shows that the representation of a nerd is, and has been, changing to a more positive one. According to the data, nerds have been creating a new representation of themselves, for instance by creating and sharing content that shows pride in nerdiness. Popular culture has also brought nerd culture more into mainstream, which is helping to change the old perceptions.

Nerd memes use three different humor strategies to create laughter, all relating to the superiority theory of humor studies. These strategies accomplish different things. Disciplinary humor is used by non-nerds to maintain old nerd stereotypes and to keep social hierarchies intact. However, nerds themselves use this humor type to show females that they are not accepted as members of nerd culture. By using rebellious humor nerds are able to challenge the old stereotypes and hierarchies, and resist the ridicule. The third humor strategy is reverse humor, which turns stereotypes and discourses around. When nerds ridicule themselves based on the same features non-nerds mock them for, the power of the initial insults is lessened.

These humor strategies link to power structures. The new nerd representation has affected the established social hierarchies. Nerds have been able to rise higher in the hierarchy due to changes in the contemporary societies. This has, however, caused non-nerds to feel threatened. This is the reason why nerds are still ridiculed and presented through old stereotypes. Changes in social hierarchies have also happened inside nerd culture, as female nerds have tried to acquire acceptance and recognition.

Ridicule is used to show superiority and to point out the preferred social order. Non-nerds ridicule nerds and try to exclude them from the “normal” society. They feel threatened because nerds have been acquiring a more masculine status, due to digital culture changing values in work environments, therefore becoming more appreciated in the society and gaining new social power. In addition, nerds are ridiculing and excluding females from nerd culture. This is done to maintain the newly acquired masculinity. The data supported the wider discussion concerning changes in hegemonic masculinity.

Nerds are also ridiculing non-nerds, making fun of their lessening status in the society and showing that nerds will be the ones succeeding in contemporary societies. This is also a form of revenge after being laughed at for decades: nerds are using their new popularity for retaliation. Nerds also ridicule themselves for all the stereotypical features, showing they do not take life too seriously.

Previous studies used for discussion presented the stereotypical nerd representations – the looks, interests, and failing relationships – which, based on the data, still exist. Ridicule was stated to be important in creating and maintaining social order, which was confirmed through the humor used in the data. Statements made in previous studies, regarding how changes in social order intimidate people, were proven by the data, with the usage of ridicule and/or exclusion.

This study is important and useful, because it shows how participatory Internet culture is creating new representations, and how large of a role nerds have online. This study provides new information about nerd culture and how it is perceived, especially how humor plays an important role in it. American popular culture is repeatedly using nerdy characters and niche, spreading this subculture across the globe, which means that nerds are becoming more visible in the mainstream culture.

The limitations of this study concern interpreting humor. It can never be all-inclusive, as the interpretation of jokes can vary to a great extent between individuals. Understanding data like the one examined in this study requires certain literacy, for both different kinds of memes and elements of nerd culture. Additionally, the data was collected from a single image-hosting site, and therefore it does not necessarily provide a wide perspective into the topic – despite the data amount being rather large and versatile.

Further research is needed, and this study opens a discussion for it. Girl nerds have not yet been widely studied. Their battle for acceptance, for instance, offers an interesting and very current topic for research. I also recommend studying nerd humor further, because it appears to be very specific and visible especially on the Internet. In addition, an interesting topic e.g. for a doctorate level thesis would be to research gamers known as “streamers”, who share their computer screens online while playing video games. These streamers use e.g. a platform called *Twitch*, sometimes having tens of thousands of live viewers. Some of these streamers have become wealthy celebrities inside nerd culture, influencing other nerds and gamers across the globe. A large number of the most successful ones are American, which again shows how central the U.S. is to nerd culture. The fame, the streaming culture,

the viewers who write comments while the game is on, and the communities that are created, offer a fascinating topic to look into.

This study showed how important different humor strategies are in online conversations, and what they are able to achieve. Nerds are still pictured through old representations, but their role and presence on the Internet and society at large has been changing. This study showed that there is a social order on the Internet, but that it is not necessarily the same one as in the real world. The data proved how Internet memes can address larger topics and issues, and affect perceptions. All this illustrates that there might be more to a funny meme than one would think.

References

Primary sources

The analyzed data: nerd memes. *MemeCenter*.

<https://www.memecenter.com/search?query=nerd> (accessed November 12, 2016).

“About.” *Know Your Meme*. <http://knowyourmeme.com/about> (accessed April 17, 2017).

“Butthurt Dweller/Gordo Granudo.” *Know Your Meme*.

<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/butthurt-dweller-gordo-granudo> (accessed March 22, 2017).

Brooks, David. “The Alpha Geeks.” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/23/opinion/23brooks.html> (accessed March 25, 2017).

Gilmore, Lauren. “24 Must-See Movies Proving Geek is Chic.” *The Next Web*, February 28, 2017. <https://thenextweb.com/distract/2017/02/26/nerds-rule-movies/> (accessed March 1 2017).

Graham, Luke. “Nintendo Sells Nearly 200,000 Units of Its Mini Retro Console.” *CNBC.com*, December 16, 2016. <http://www.cnbc.com/2016/12/16/nintendo-sells-196000-nes-classic-edition-retro-console.html> (accessed April 28, 2017).

“Hackerman.” *Know Your Meme*. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hackerman> (accessed March 17, 2017).

“Hipster.” *Oxford American English Dictionary*. Online.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/hipster> (accessed April 27, 2017).

“Idiot Nerd Girl.” *Know Your Meme*. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/idiot-nerd-girl> (accessed March 23, 2017).

“If You Know What I Mean.” *Know Your Meme*.

<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/if-you-know-what-i-mean> (accessed April 19, 2017).

“John Barrowman.” *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*.

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0057882/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

“Joseph Gordon-Levitt.” *IMDb*.

http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0330687/?ref_=nv_sr_2 (accessed March 23, 2017).

Kosoff, Maya. “Here’s Evidence That it’s Still Not a Great Time to be a Woman in Silicon Valley.” *Business Insider*, January 2, 2015.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/women-hold-just-11-of-executive-positions-at->

silicon-valley-tech-companies-2015-1?r=US&IR=T&IR=T (accessed April 20, 2017).

“MemeCenter.” *Know Your Meme*.

<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/memecenter> (accessed February 22, 2017).

Meme Center Wiki. http://memecenter.wikia.com/wiki/Meme_Center_Wiki (accessed February 22, 2017).

“Nerd.” *Oxford English Thesaurus*. Online.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/thesaurus/nerd> (accessed February 15, 2017).

“Noob.” *Oxford American English Dictionary*. Online.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/noob> (accessed March 6, 2017).

“Not safe for work (NSFW).” *Oxford American English Dictionary*. Online.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/nsfw> (accessed February 20, 2017).

“Original Poster (OP).” *Oxford American English Dictionary*. Online.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/op> (accessed April 29, 2017).

“Parents’ Guide to Pokémon.” *Pokémon.com*. <http://www.pokemon.com/us/parents-guide/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

Surowiecki, James. “Is Pokémon Go’s Success Sustainable?” *The New Yorker*, July 16 2016. <http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/is-pokemon-gos-success-sustainable> (accessed March 18, 2017).

“The Breakfast Club.” *IMDb*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088847/> (accessed March 28, 2017).

Wingfield, Nick. “Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in ‘GamerGate’ Campaign.” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2014.

https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/16/technology/gamergate-women-video-game-threats-anita-sarkeesian.html?_r=0 (accessed April 1, 2017).

Wong, Raymond. “You Shouldn’t Be Ashamed of Playing ‘Pokémon Go’ and Loving It.” *Mashable*, July 16 2016. http://mashable.com/2016/07/16/pokemon-go-embarrassed/#hknY_tv_bkqc (accessed March 18, 2017).

Yapalater, Lauren and Dave Stopera. “32 Reasons Why Robert Downey Jr. Is the Most Perfect Man in the Universe.” *Buzzfeed*, April 25, 2013.

https://www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/reasons-robert-downey-jr-is-the-greatest-man-who-ever-liv?utm_term=.ua553vkAE#.ckYgwJ9L2 (accessed March 17, 2017).

Secondary sources

Abenidifard, Mostafa. "Ridicule, Gender Hegemony, And the Disciplinary Function of Mainstream Gender Humour." *Social Semiotics* 26, no. 3 (2016): 234–249.

Adler, Patricia A. and Peter Adler. *Peer power: Preadolescent culture and identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Artz, Lee and Bren Ortega Murphy. *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000.

Billig, Michael. *Laughter and Ridicule. Towards a Social Critique of Humor*. London: Sage Publications, 2005.

Bucholtz, Mary. "Why Be Normal?: Language and Identity Practices in a Community of Nerd Girls." *Language in Society* 28, no. 2 (1999): 203–223.

Bucholtz, Mary. "The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no.1 (2001): 84–100.

Burr, Vivien. *Social Constructionism*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge, 2003.

Carter, Bryan W. *Digital Humanities. Current Perspective, Practices, and Research*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2013.

Cheng, Cliff. "Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999): 295–315.

Cockburn, Cynthia. *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men and Technical Know-How*. London: Pluto Press, 1985.

Coleman, Gabriella E. "Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls: The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle." In *The Social Media Reader*, edited by Michael Mandiberg, 99–119. New York: NYU Press, 2012.

Connell, R. W. *The Men and the Boys*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005 [1995].

Cooper, Marianne. "Being the "Go-To Guy": Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the Organization of Work in Silicon Valley." *Qualitative Sociology* 23, no. 4 (2000): 379–405.

Creeber, Glen and Royston Martin. "Introduction." In *Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media*, edited by Glen Creeber and Royston Martin, 1–10. New York: Open University Press, 2009.

Cristopherson, Kimberly M. "The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog"." *Computers in Human Behavior* 23 (2007): 3038–3056.

Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. London, Routledge, 2002.

Crosnoe, Robert. *Fitting In, Standing Out: Navigating the Social Challenges of High School to Get an Education*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Davidson, Patrick. "The Language of Internet Memes". In *The Social Media Reader*, edited by Michael Mandiberg, 120–134. New York: NYU Press, 2012.

Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. 30th anniversary edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1976].

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1994 [1966].

Duchscherer, Katie M. and John F. Dovidio. "When Memes Are Mean: Appraisals of and Objections to Stereotypic Memes," *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 2, no. 3 (2016): 335–345.

Eckert, Penelope. *Jocks and burnouts: Social identity in the high school*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1989.

Eglash, Ron. "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters." *Social Text* 71, vol. 20, no. 2 (2002): 49–64.

Ford, Thomas E. and Mark A Ferguson. "Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 79–94.

Gere, Charlie. *Digital Culture*. 2nd edition. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.

Hall, Stuart. *Identiteetti*. Translated by Mikko Lehtonen and Juha Herkman. Tampere: Vastapaino, 1999.

Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation." In *Representation*, edited by Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, 1–59. 2nd edition. London: Sage Publications, 2013.

Hall, Stuart. "The Spectacle of the 'Other'." In *Representation*, edited by Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, 215–287. 2nd edition. London: Sage Publications, 2013.

Hamm, Bernd and Russell Smandych, eds. *Cultural Imperialism: Essays on the Political Economy of Cultural Domination*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2005.

Hand, Martin. *Making Digital Cultures: Access, Interactivity, and Authenticity*. Oxford: Routledge, 2008.

Hills, Matt. "Case study: Social networking and self-identity." In *Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media*, edited by Glen Creeber and Royston Martin, 117–119. Berkshire: Open University Press, 2009.

Kendall, Lori. "Nerd Nations: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 260–283.

Kendall, Lori. "'Oh No, I'm a Nerd!': Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum." *Gender & Society* 14, no. 2 (2000): 256–274.

Kendall, Lori. "'White and Nerdy': Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 33, no. 3 (2011): 505–524.

Kinney, David A. "From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School." *Sociology of Education* 66 (1993): 21–40.

Knobel, Michele, and Colin Lankshear. "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production." In *A New Literacies Sampler Vol. 29*, edited by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, 199–227. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis. An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004.

Lintott, Sheila. "Superiority in Humor Theory." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 4 (2016): 347–358.

McArthur, J. A. "Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2009): 58–70.

Martin, Rod A. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. London: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007.

Matrix, Sydney Eve. *Cyberpop: Digital Lifestyles and Commodity Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Milner, Murray, Jr., *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Milner, Ryan. "The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media." PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2012.

Milner, Ryan M. "FCJ-156 Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and Logic of Lulz". *The Fibreculture Journal* 22 (2013): 62–92.

Neuendorf, Kimberly A. *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002.

Nissenbaum, Asaf and Limor Shifman. "Internet Memes as Contested Cultural Capital: The Case of 4chan's /b/ Board." *new media & society* (October 9, 2015): 1–19.

Nye, Joseph S. Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

Reagle, Joseph. "Geek Policing: Fake Geek Girls and Contested Attention." *International Journal of Communication*, no. 9 (2015): 2862–2880.

Shifman, Limor and Dafna Lemish. "'Mars and Venus' in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and the Internet." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2011): 253–273.

Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2014.

Taecharungroj, Viriya & Pitchanut Nueangjamnong. "Humor 2.0: Styles and Types of Humor and Virality of Memes on Facebook." *Journal of Creative Communications* 10, no. 3 (2015): 288–302.

Turkle, Sherry. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. 20th anniversary edition. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.

Wajcman, Judy. *Feminism Confronts Technology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

Wiggins, Bradley E. and G. Bret Bowers. "Memes as Genre: A Structural Analysis of the Memescape." *new media & society* 17, no. 11 (2015): 1886–1906.

Weaver, Simon. "The 'Other' Laughs Back: Humor and Resistance in Anti-Racist Comedy." *Sociology* 44, no. 1 (2010): 31–48.

Williams, J. Patrick. "Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 2 (2006): 173–200.

Woo, Benjamin. "Alpha Nerds: Cultural Intermediaries in a Subcultural Scene." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 659–676.

Appendix 1

List of the 25 memes used for closer analysis in chapters 4, 5, and 6. Gathered from Memecenter.com on November 12, 2016 by performing a search using the term “nerd”. The memes that are used as visible examples in the analysis chapters have the image number mentioned after the title in parenthesis, for clarity.

Title	URL
Nerd representation (Image 2)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/555460/life
Pop culture vs. reality (Image 3)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/232187/know-the-difference
Wrong server, noob (Image 4)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/521514/wrong-server-noob
Music nerd (Image 5)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/205990/get-your-facts-straight
Not just computing (Image 6)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/380202/not-just-a-geek
Unmanly LARPing	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/909665/stunned
Virginity protected (Image 7)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/308655/they-gathered
Forever single (Image 8)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/129962/Lonely-nerd
Calculator lover (Image 9)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/300059/great-fap-level
Drink till you want me	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/158181/alcoholsatisfiesnerdssincethestoneage
Hackerman (Image 10)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/6185223/ma-job
Hooligan nerds	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/2067789/we-are-bad
Bored in class (Image 11)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/6451505/math-nerd
Never apologize	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/6576959/john-barrowman-the-best-captain-jack-disembodied-face-thing-ever
Pokémon master (Image 12)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/106462/Dont-Call-Me-Nerd
Super nerd	https://www.memecenter.com/fun/3057615/super-nerd-helping-students-from-pop-quizes
Aggressive karate nerd (Image 13)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/1013785/ninja-nerd
IT workers	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/790623/generic-filler-title
At least not pink	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/4258531/you-nerd
Nerdy innuendo (Image 14)	https://www.memecenter.com/fun/3642243/horny-nerds-know-what-he-mean

Idiot nerd girl (Image 15)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/931619/idiot-nerd-bitch
Fake nerd	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/895297/nigga-nerd
What nerds want (Image 16)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/95386/Every-Nerds-Dream-Pardon-me-Every-Mens-Dream
Attention whore (Image 17)	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/1967697/nobody-believes-her
Nerd girl paradox	http://www.memecenter.com/fun/4894355/no-wonder-you-are-single